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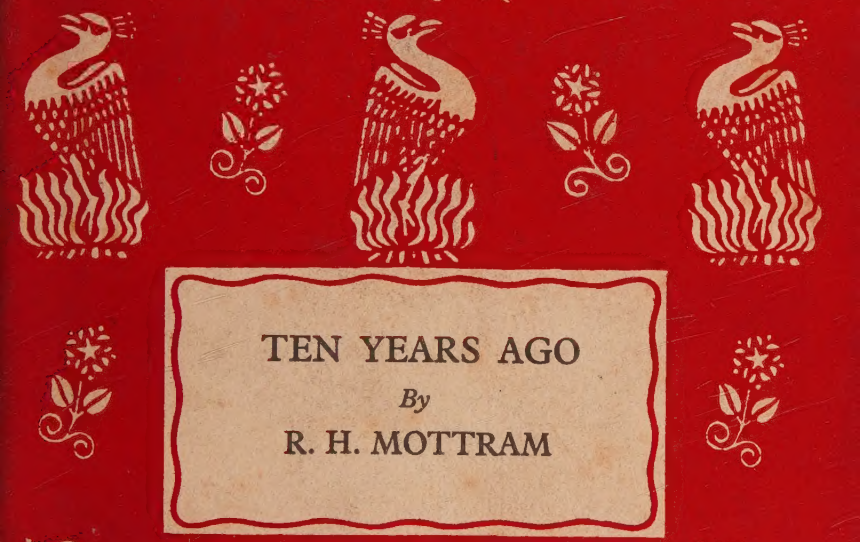

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By

R. H. MOTTRAM

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*

TEN YEARS AGO

Oh, Oh, Oh, It 's a lovely War !
(What do we want with eggs and ham
When we get plum and apple jam ?)
Form Fours, Right Turn !
(How shall we spend the money we earn ?)
Oh, Oh, Oh, It 's a lovely War !

[SONG OF KITCHENER'S ARMY.]

A list
of further titles in the Phoenix Library,
in which 'The Spanish Farm' appears,
will be found at the end
of this book

TEN YEARS AGO

ARMISTICE AND OTHER MEMORIES

FORMING A PENDANT

TO

'THE SPANISH FARM TRILOGY'

By

R. H. MOTTRAM

CHATTO AND WINDUS
LONDON

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FOREWORD

TEN years. And, incredible as it would once have seemed, one begins to forget. After all, they have not been, as one half expected, years of carpet slippers and comfort, and perpetual reminiscence.

One remembers the Salient, of course, and the stables of Hooge Château, and the incessant whine-cum-shriek of shells. What is growing dim in the memory is not what the papers afterwards assured us was the stuff of battles, nor the blood and noise and horror which form the staple ingredients of war fact and fiction.

We took our civilian minds to the wars, and wore not khaki in our brains. Not what we did, or what was done to us, but what we thought of it all—that is what is being gradually forgotten ; and that especially is what the pages which follow will surely bring back to us.

We did not argue, even in our own minds, for or against war. Most of us tried to do the job thoroughly, not because we liked it, or even because we had to, but because we were perfectly sure it was being done finally. No shadow of doubt on that point existed.

We always meant to make that quite clear

when the right time came. But the complexities of peace succeeded those of war—and somehow we kept silent. It has been a significant silence, like those two brief minutes on Armistice Day, and just as definitely it has meant ' never again.'

W. E. BATES,
LATE C.Q.M.S., H.A.C.

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TEN YEARS AGO

I

NEVER AGAIN!

NEVER again, and yet always, until we die, shall we know that place, that hour. To those of us who were there it is a mockery to go back to the Salient, as tourists, on a summer day.

It might be difficult to locate so much that has been cleared away, or rebuilt, but what makes the place so utterly unrecognisable is that most of us never saw it in daylight, standing erect upon the ground.

But back there, in memory, some of us can go, if we shut our eyes and stop our ears.

In that place it was always dusk, and if not winter, always raining. We mustered in some sodden pasture of the rich Flemish plain that, to us, was but a battlefield.

We filed out into the 'road,' some obscure Belgian cart-track, that, by chance, had become the highway for thousands of English-speaking men to tread every night, and for fewer to return by, before dawn.

All day long the three lines—the firing line, the support line, the reserve line—were

deserted—every one under cover and silent, and those who might be, asleep.

But at dusk a whole population suddenly arose from the earth; and up from behind men must go to take rations and water, ammunition and sandbags, duckboards, and who knows what else; sometimes to take part in a more ambitious raid, once a year in a full-dress attack, but always, always to dig and dig, like condemned men, like condemned souls.

There were bad places everywhere in that line that stretched from the French and Belgian outposts near Nieuport, right across France, and away east in the Balkans and Palestine to Mespot. You could be bombed and gassed, shelled and machine-gunned anywhere, half-way across the world. But at Ypres you could also be drowned.

So by night they dug, dug to drain that ever-present flood that fell from the sky and oozed up from the ground, that collected in shell-hole and latrine, and rose and rose.

Behold them then, well started on their way, the narrow lane crawling with lorries, mule limbers, other parties like themselves. Behind the party, somewhere in the dripping darkness, were billets in which they slept without squelching, had baths sometimes, or a game or entertainment.

In front was a little ruined town, something between a village with a market, and one of those 'show' antique towns like Tewkesbury, that Americans go to.

It was empty and ruinous, and its narrow streets were death-traps, where every shell added stone splinters to its own shrapnel. But beyond it was the desert.

It was a lucky party that got so far without a casualty. But before they got further, the western sky would glare brick-red, and the fine deep trumpet-like eruption of their own field batteries, half as heavy again as any other field guns in the world, would deafen them, fired, as they were, directly over their heads, at toiling German parties, exact counterparts of their own.

It was one of the signs of change in that ever-changing war, that our men began to wish those guns would not. Very few months of living in front of Ypres cured most of them of any animus against those field-grey enemies who were never seen, but were sometimes heard pumping and digging.

Then it was discovered what had happened. The war had taken charge. Something far greater than any feeling of hostility was in motion, and must grind slowly to its destiny. Above those men, in that drizzling

night, rose an immense impersonal figure, some clumsy giant, of huge strength, mowing and raking, he did not know why. Under such augury, beneath that threat, those men of ours went on. Beyond the town, beyond the dumps, on towards that horizon where the greenish star-shells rose and fell, they would go. Then another light mixed with that of star-shells, and there would come that ripping asunder of the sky, and upheaval of the earth, the blinding deafening roar, the flying jagged bits, the whiff of gas.

That was the battle, that opposing of human flesh and bone to those steel and chemical thunderbolts, so numerous, so well directed, so often larger and much heavier than a man. That is the bravery that, far greater than any prowess in personal combat, gilds the dark memories of the Salient.

Dazed and bewildered, from somewhere in the mud would come that scared cry : ' Stretcher-bearer ! ' and, incredible as it now seems, men came forward and actually lifted a body on to a stretcher and staggered off with it to some cellar. And one would drag from his boots a voice that managed to say : ' Go on, go on ; it 's no good stopping here ! ' And forward once more the pro-

cession would go, not to attack the enemy and win, not to establish liberty, nor to defeat tyranny, but only to bring up sufficient food and ammunition to the place where they could be used to keep it all going on for another day.

And, marvellous now to reflect upon, it was kept going. The men who manned the fire-step, those who hid in the machine-gun emplacements and 'strong points' of the second and third lines (all mere euphemisms for shallow ditches half full of water, marked by blasted trees, sinking woodwork and rotting sandbags), actually were fed and maintained during all those years. They died every other sort of death, but not from hunger or lack of ammunition.

How was it done? The Germans held their line thinly and relied on machine-guns. The French relied on their seventy-fives. But the British trenches were held by men. And in the depths of that swamp of despair, when it became unbearable, did they abandon hope? Not a bit of it.

They began to sing. Patriotic songs of the Fatherland, like the Germans? Sentimental lays of Madelon? No. With words of their own, set to hymn tunes of their childhood, they saluted those implacable skies, the imminent death, the

frantic boredom of long hours that were filled with keeping out of sight.

'Old soldiers never die, never die, never die!' rose from the throats of clerks and factory hands whose months of service had seen more war than any regular soldier had dreamed of for a hundred years, to deny the obvious fact that they were dying, dying so fast that sometimes the names on the roll meant little to the officer or sergeant, before they had to be struck off.

'We haven't got our rations!' to the tune of 'The Church's one foundation' was another deliberate travesty of such faint decency and reason as remained. Occasionally they would be mildly ribald, but only once saturnine, in

> Have you seen the Corporal?
> I know where he is!

which came late, when even British patience and lugubrious good-humour were giving way.

The Salient was small, a semi-circular district whose diameter was eight miles of the canal that ran through Ypres, north and south, and whose circumference was the line of trenches from Pilkem, out to Hooge, three miles east of Ypres, and down to St. Eloi.

When into this crowded and minutely-shot-over ground were herded, besides its normal defenders, corps upon corps of fresh troops, it was difficult for shell or bomb to miss.

Then it was that whole divisions were hammered into the mud, and the ruin wrought by that fantastic array of great machines was so complete that the conquered ground could not be occupied, often not held, and had eventually to be yielded. The firm earth had gone back to chaos.

Then at length came the anti-climax of October 1918. The iron band that had bound the British Armies to that narrow indispensable corner for four years suddenly dissolved and on the Salient descended a silence that has dwelt there ever since.

To those who remember, it is an uncanny stillness, a constant waiting for sound and movement that had been so vital and is now hushed for ever.

This is what the memorial at the Menin Gate commemorates.

It is fittingly placed. The three main avenues of death, Zillebeke and St. Jean and the Menin Way between them, are now as quiet as if the ghosts that crowd them stood too thick to admit of the passage of a living thing. The Menin Gate is the centre of it all.

Against its southern lintel there used to be one of those shallow and primitive land-mines, a ' fougasse ' it was marked on the C.R.E.'s map. It was the device of those early days when it was still thought possible that Ypres might have to be defended from the ramparts Vauban built two centuries before.

One night, returning from the usual grim adventure, men found the gate blocked by the usual poor carcases of man and beast and wreckage of some vehicle. While it was being cleared the fidgeting crowd of scarecrow parties, dragging wearily ' home,' saw a great Canadian, carrying some grotesque piece of tunnelling machinery, seat himself there quietly. And under the shadow of death the word went round, and the funny man of some long-ago-annihilated platoon chirruped :

' 'Ere 's a son of Hempire wot 's come free fousand miles to fight ! Just look at 'im fightin' ! '

The big Colonial grinned his silent grin, and a Cockney voice added : ' 'E 's sitting on the lift for 'eaven ! ' Above the clamour of the battle soared the laughter of those civilian-soldier boys.

They will not put that on the memorial. What they should put is : ' Never again ! '

For never again shall we see with mortal eyes so many of those who went there with us, night after dreadful night; and their memory must stand in stone, imperishable beyond our dwindling generation that knew them. And the words have another meaning: 'Never again' must human flesh and blood be subjected to that strain. If it is, we may need a memorial for civilisation itself.

II

SOMEWHERE IN FRANCE

THE more one reflects upon the events of ten years ago, the queerer seems the situation they created. That English-speaking men (and no small number of women) should go to Egypt, the Dardanelles, Mesopotamia, India is no new thing. They have done so, time and again, to some of these ; they go regularly to others, as part of the working of Empire.

But B.E.F. 'Somewhere in France' brings memories of a very different tradition, of Plantagenets, trying to preserve their inheritance in Normandy and Gascony, and of the 'Low Countries,' as our great-great-grandfathers called them, where the last English king to lead his troops in person charged at the head of the Life Guards less than two hundred years ago. Never since those far-off days has an English-speaking army sat down for so long on the same ground, and never, from the days of George II., has a monarch of these seaward isles watched his troops go into action as, on more than one occasion, George V. did.

The area so occupied spread over portions

of three of the largest departments of France, and a corner of Belgium. Geographically, there were three completely different regions. There was Flanders, a flat, rich marsh of the North Sea basin, a section of the great estuary so like the East Anglian marshes opposite. From Nieuport down toward Calais, and away inland to Armentières stretch the wide meadows where the people speak mainly Flemish, and dress like the Dutch, while the landscape is that of canals and Holland elms that one associates with pictures of the Flemish painters. It was in order to circumvent the flooding of the north-eastern corner of this area that Ypres became the object of so great an effort by the German Armies.

The second region peopled by the British armies began on the coast at Gris-nez, and was marked by the sudden rise from the Flemish estuary to a range of steeply undulating chalk downs, closely resembling their counterpart across the Channel, in Sussex. This district ran inland until it became that which will always be known in our islands as the Battlefield of the Somme, where the second main phase of the war occurred—that in which the Allies took the initiative.

And wedged between the two is yet a

third district, differing from both the others —the French Black Country, the industrial district that, beginning with the cotton towns of the Lys Valley, extends south in front of Lens, embracing Loos, where the New Armies received their fiery baptism. It is immortalised in the names Neuve Chapelle, Loos, La Bassée, and Vimy.

This rough survey of the domicile of millions of our own during four years brings into relief one of the most curious things about the war. It avoided or cut across not only racial distinctions and physical features. It left on one side the modern highways, for the railway line familiar to every tourist from Calais and Boulogne, through Abbeville to Amiens and Paris, ran miles in the rear. The less known but important line through Hazebrouck and Armentières to Lille ran into the trenches.

Between the two was an almost railless country of villages among root and grain fields and pastures, linked by roads, or even lanes, so small that they frequently had to be re-metalled, when the colossal stream of motor transport ground them to powder.

But to see where the war really happened, one must go to tiny Dickebusch or unheard-of Engelbelmer, by Dirty Bucket Corner, or Épinette Tavern, through which, day after

day, whole Army Corps used to pour. It is difficult, now, to believe that Poperinghe and Albert, Bethune and St. Pol ever looked like Aldershot and were as important as Salisbury Plain. Those sleepy little holes have long relapsed into the obscurity from which the accidental crystallisation of the first few months of dramatic open warfare into the long stalemate of the fixed trench line so miraculously dragged them, their only evidence of what they were being the graveyards that surround them and the traffic in visitors.

There is, however, one historic line that the war did follow, in some measure. From around Dunkirk, on the coast, through Bergues, about Cassel, and by Bailleul (now alas, flat with the dust) to Aire in the Lys Valley, and as far as Arras, stand old, thick-walled, moated farmhouses, and in the towns grim guard-room-like towers.

The ghosts of our own people throng as thickly as any that land. True, it is now four hundred years since the last English garrisons quitted Calais and Boulogne, but the fact survives in the names of the streets. It is three hundred since we sold Dunkirk for money back to the French. More glorious are the memories of a certain sloping field (near

to the saw-mills of an English Forestry Company in 1918) where there stood the stump of an ancient stone cross, to show where the Black Prince found the body of King John of Bohemia. For that field is Crécy.

Coming to more modern times, there used to live in Hazebrouck until late in the nineteenth century an old grandam who could remember how, in 1815, an English soldier, John Watt of the army of occupation of those days, had carried her on his shoulder. Now, in the Rue d'Aire, may be seen the château at which French made his first headquarters. That was but a temporary measure of early days, and when the British armies poured across in all their strength, the sector Ypres-Armentières became the front of the Second Army, under Lord Plumer, whose headquarters, it is now hard to believe, were in moribund Cassel, unique hillock of the Flemish plain. It is worth a visit, for the view on a clear day extends from the spires of Dunkirk to the smoke stacks of Lille, embracing the first British front of October 1914.

Lord French's was the third English army in our island history to enter Ypres in order to defend England, and the last to see that ancient place of strife intact.

Almost miraculously rebuilt as are the town and its approaches, one looks in vain, now, for the utterly obliterated Château of Hooge, but the equally ill-renowned Hill Sixty has been bought and presented to the nation.

Southward, the devastation in the Lys Valley is tragic ; one sighs for the handsome towers of Bailleul, homely Locre, the narrow picturesque streets of Merville and Estaires where, during years, more of English was heard than of any native tongue. South again are those twin slag heaps that recall La Bassée, and the early days of the war. So, by Vimy, that withstood the French and ourselves for two years, we come to the sites of that score of vanished villages of the great Somme offensive.

Here it is more difficult to trace what happened. The line swung east twenty miles and back again, instead of twenty furlongs as in the Salient. Also, the timber and thatched Picard villages disappear more completely than the solid Flemish towns. But Bapaume, Albert, and Péronne can still be found to show how in 1918 we lost what 1916 had so hardly won. The hill above Bray gives perhaps the best general idea of the country and its rolling distances.

So one comes to Amiens, always beautiful,

now, let us hope, forgetting its dark moments of terror and bombardment. It was the biggest town of the war area.

From the flooded area above Ypres, down the edge of the coalfield to the Somme, is for ever our country. Far more certainly than ever before is it ours. We have left there our graves and our memories. Something has died there, more than half a generation of our manhood. The next war will be a swift duel between the chemist and the engineer. We have been on our last expedition to the Low Countries. We are not likely to forget.

III

11*th* NOVEMBER 1918

That day certainly had a quality that most of our days in this modern world have lost —the fateful atmosphere that haunts certain occasions in Holy Writ or the classics —even some that adorn the plain tale of English history.

No supernatural omens hung in the air. Something more human and ordinary made that day the greatest in our lives, more directly important than Christmas, more memorable than the Diamond Jubilee. We all wanted it so ! That was the thing. All that November week and a half that preceded it, during which it was inevitable, we hoped and hoped, and longed and longed, hardly daring to mention it, for fear of seeming to importune Fate, and alienate the great boon we all desired.

The news came. The enemy had signed our terms. I cannot speak for places in the rear, but, on what had been the battle-line, there was no glory, no jubilation. There was very little material for any festivity, and that little was hard to get, so bare and worn was everything and everybody.

And, when the news was confirmed, there was no triumph, no enthusiasm, hardly any articulate relief, just a prostrating, bewildering sense of anticlimax.

What else, indeed, could there be? The war had gone on too long. The effort to keep it going had become too habitual; men had strained their spirits up to an impossible stretch of cold courage, and there was no elasticity left. There was no blessed sense as of a world-wide mutual forgiveness, only an exasperating feeling that some one had thrown a spanner into the machine.

However, we had faced sterner duties than that of celebrating the news, and bravely we set about it, in the little suburban, New-Art villa that was our mess.

The one hope was in some sort of artificial stimulant, which might cheer the heart. Some genius unearthed, at a fabulous price, a solitary bottle of champagne that one of the inhabitants had kept buried during the entire German occupation. I don't know if being buried is bad for champagne, but I recollect that it didn't seem very good to me.

However, there it was, and some whisky and rum, and we did our best. And round our candle-lighted table there was wafted—

not hilarity exactly, but a sort of macabre humour, like the grin of a skull. One earnest soul, who perhaps had not been 'out' so long as the rest, became sentimental: 'Poor old So-and-So!' he lamented, 'what a pity he missed this!' Poor old So-and-So had been killed at Messines eighteen months before. The stuttering humorist of the mess took up the point:

'Y-y-yes!' he cachinnated, 'p-p-poor old So-and-So. He has missed something, hasn't he?'

Then we all laughed, and the president rose, and the inveterates began playing cards, but one or two of us, older enlistments, sat by the black little stove and tried to count up what, besides half a glass of lifeless champagne, old So-and-So had missed.

It wasn't easy. There, on the wall, was pinned the map. We had got back most of the ground we had lost since 1914, not quite all. The recurrent menace of some enormously powerful dictatorship in the middle of Europe, against which, through all history, Englishmen had felt bound to fight, Spanish, French, and now German, had been scotched. But this was hardly noticeable in the magnitude of the thing that overwhelmed us.

So much else had happened. The entire map of Europe had been disturbed, her history given a violent shake ; and the social changes which we had seen, already arrived, at home during our infrequent leaves, were perhaps the most daunting of all. To what should we go back, and when ?

For it had already leaked out that demobilisation would be a business as lengthy as, and far more complicated than, ever enlistment had been. Already the world in which we had lived for four years was starting to dissolve at a touch.

That very day we had been called to a conference, and had seen the brigadier, the iron-hearted old regular, who had seen us through so much, agitated and feeble as never before. He had begun almost apologetically : ' Of course, I don't understand this soldiering and then going home. But I 'll do my very best for you, any of you, in civilian life, or whatever it is you will want now . . . ! '

His voice trailed off in complete perplexity, and he let the staff captain read the blithering 'orders' Division had sent about the fate of humanity, which, as the padre was fond of saying, we had decided.

But it was quite clear that the Army had

no further use for us, would get rid of us, nearly all, as soon as possible, didn't know what to do with us in the meanwhile, and hoped we would save it the trouble of deciding. And we, individually, pondered such prospects as we might have in the horrifying rush for jobs, or the hope of finding, and possibly piecing together again, the lamed remains of the careers we had abandoned in 1914.

That was what old So-and-So had missed.

We sat silent. The card-players spoke in low tones. And no wonder. For that night, for the first time in those years, there was an aching stillness outside. No machine-gunning, no heavies searching the roads, no grinding of ambulances, no rattle and murmur of parties going up forward to dig.

It weighed on us. What should have been triumph had turned out to be anti-climax. The anticlimax was too tragic, too ironical. The irony had become cosmic, supernatural, as though the sky were asking dumbly :

' Well, what are you going to do now ? '

and listening for an answer.

And, in that unearthly silence, there came three hesitating taps at our window. If a five-nine had burst in the room we could not all have started up so nervously.

The major recovered first.

'What 's that?' he rasped.

The humorist had possibly had more to drink than most of us, for he answered :

'A-a-angels of Mons, come for the m-money!'

But the Lewis gun officer undid the complicated French fastening of the casement, that gave directly upon the little street, and leaned out. We could hear his gruff, schoolboy French, mixed with a thin Franco-Belgian dialect. He drew in, blinking and mystified.

'There 's a civilian here, sir!'

'Alone?' from the cautious major.

More peering, then :

'He 's got a woman, and two children, and a barrow and a dog!'

'H'm. What does he want?'

Colloquy. The Lewis gunner reported :

'He wants to know if he can go home, now, sir!'

'Tell him to go to ——! Where 's his home?'

It was ascertained : 'Nouveau Monde!'

Few of us had ever heard of it. Fortunately the major dated from 1915.

'Nonsense! There isn't such a place now. It was in No-Man's Land for three years. Tell him he can't!'

Either the Lewis gunner couldn't explain, or the invisible one wouldn't understand, and the major added :

'Tell him to go back to wherever he 's just come from !'

Another effort, apparently useless. Translated reply :

'He says he 's been with the Boche four years and the war 's over now. . . .'

We heard no more. The Lewis gunner moved back, and there, framed in the window, against the darkness, was a head. The face was not terrible or wonderful or even pathetic. It was very pallid compared with our war-worn bronze, the eyes very dark, the lips very pale. But what made it horrible to look at was the impression it gave of humanity just existing at the lowest possible civilised level. It was surmounted by one of those foreign caps with glazed peak, in which was stuck a tiny Christmas-tree Union Jack, of the sort the Germans had been selling as they marched out.

And, as we looked, a sort of thin smile stirred the lips and that head began to nod towards us, and one of us, outraged, cried :

'Good God ! He 's thanking us !'

With one gesture, every hand flew to its owner's pocket. Some one grabbed a plate ; it was filled with franc notes and

thrust out of the window, which was closed with a bang.

None of us could look at another. The humorist alone was proofed with whisky, and in the silence his voice arose :

'St-st-stout fellow ! Sp-lendid lad ! He wan's ter go home. SO DO I !'

That broke up the party of Eleventh November 1918.

IV

ONE DAY IN EVERY YEAR

WHAT images are there hovering this day of all the days of the year behind the eyes of the ex-soldier of the New Armies? When the signal is made he will stand, as he always does, and close his eyes. And in the startling quiet of the town, he will pass from it as he always passes.

First, he will hear the band, the band that isn't there, but that plays inside his head, faint, not because it is a few streets away, but because it is thirteen years away. Thump, thump, goes the drum, and the surge of the brass makes the words form in his ears, as he heard them sung then :

> For we don't want to lose you,
> But we think you ought to go !

Thump, thump. He is back on the dusty road before the old Depot barracks. He has not gone back alone. Squeezed and shoved by a great, happy, reeking, roaring crowd, he vies with them for the privilege of grabbing the magic paper—the attestation—that is to witness the fact that he has thrown away the life he has been

living—the most quiet and decent life in all the world—at his job, in his native town. He throws it away as though it were something unclean and obnoxious, in order to lose his collar and most of the skin off his ankle, fighting to be made into a soldier. In his ear, a hoarse voice from unshaven lips implores him :

' Got a bit o' pencil, mate ? '

His has long been gone, but across him, the clear, cultivated voice of a tall, well-dressed man answers for him :

' Here you are ! '—handing over a silver pencil.

' Thank y', Mister ! '

He hasn't time to decide if ' Mister ' is quite right, for those behind are forcing his lot good-humouredly through the gateway, on to the square, where a few hastily collected officers and N.C.O.'s will sort them out, take their papers, do the necessary.

As he goes out under the arch, he has a sudden recollection that, it is said, in the Chicago factories they get the animals on to a certain slope, and herd-instinct carries them forward to the machine. Absurd—and he soon forgets it, standing in a batch of twenty, hand raised to take the oath to his king. The scene changes.

No band any longer ; nothing now but a

devil's tattoo, which, however, neither surprises nor alarms, it has become so familiar. Everywhere damp, and a smell of rotting ; everything broken and upturned ; and he and others crouching in the middle of it all in the most matter-of-fact way, having been doing so, off and on, for months without much chance of varying it, save by going back a mile or two to bathe in a brewery vat—a great joke, this—or to sleep, twelve hours on end, on the bare boards of a Belgian school for young ladies.

There, one morning, he had been softly awakened by his neighbour, in order to enjoy the sight of a third, next to the broken window, from which the snow had drifted on to his upturned face. There it had collected while he snored ; so that he became the butt of the company, who aver he does it for the sake of his complexion, and ask whether he wants the Kaiser to kiss him.

But just now they are ' up in front ' again, and have scrambled about in the dark and suddenly found themselves confronted with other men in flattish helmets, with guttural voices, and have loosed off everything lethal about them, presumably with effect, for they are troubled no more, but lug back a machine-gun, and are very proud.

And now, for reward, there come to them others, bringing food and fuel, and astonishingly strange letters, that, muddied and crumpled, have been brought there at the cost of men's lives. Those letters, how remote the atmosphere they bring, how queer the news they give, of a funny life people are living away back there at home, out of it all. *They* find it very hard, it seems ; but before this can be made out, hot food and drinks are there, and they gulp these, and roll over in the squelching mud, and yawn once. A few inches above their noses, under helpless stars, whizzes the stream of leaden death, and great lumps of steel and chemicals, bigger than a man, plunge among them now and again ; but fatigue compels, and a full belly assures, and glory (one machine-gun) gilds, their sleep.

The scene changes. Now it is June, and hope is high, and those who survive have left that horrid swamp, and are marching in fine weather through new, undevastated country—high chalky downs like Sussex—where there are wild flowers in the fields, orchards, and great old wattle-and-daub barns to lie in. They are marching to victory—that is, those who have escaped the swamp are wondering if it will be victory —and a lot of new boys mixed in with them

are playing mouth-organs, and regard the whole thing as a picnic. Certainly there are preparations enough, and fine weather, and the mouth-organs go whee-aaah :

> The roses round the door
> Make me love mother more !

So they take over quiet-looking French trenches. They are quite polite about it, though secretly, perhaps, they think :

' Now we 'll show them ! '

The French seem pretty glum, but Verdun has been a trying experience for them.

The day comes, the enormous mass of men, so huge and docile that they resemble some great machine more than anything human, gets under way, heralded by such a gigantic noise that one might wonder at it, if one could wonder any longer at anything.

Again the scene changes. The great noise passes from memory, and there succeeds a great silence, and everything is very pale and subdued.

What is this strange palace in which so many lie, between high shaded windows, while there move among them quiet, efficient people who dispose of them, so helpless are they, with complete authority ? It is a strange contrast. For two years these men

have lived so vigorous a life, slept often in the open, enjoyed the few attainable pleasures so vividly, made light of the growing suspicion that there is something wrong somewhere and that the superhuman effort they are making is not producing any result. And now suddenly they have been brought here asleep, and waking ask what place it is.

This is the palace of suffering, where men, lying in bed, with limbs supported in grotesque frames, cry out suddenly without meaning to, or lie for hours, listless, in utter torpor. But they cannot stay here long, so many trainloads press behind. They must go, and they do, some under a Union Jack to the enormous cemetery, some to other places where they can be patched and mended and sent back again, with much food for thought, to the same war, going on, a little more intensely, in practically the same trenches.

Things seem to be speeding up, but never to be sped. And the conviction steals upon one that one is not really fighting Germans—one is simply fighting. The organisation lies spread over land and sea, earth and steel are built into it, transport and communication feed and inform it, men tend it, and it goes on grinding changelessly. Only the men change ; they are ended, not the war.

Where are they—he of the hoarse voice who borrowed the pencil, and he who lent it, and all those boys with mouth-organs ?

One doesn't know, but one could guess.

And now memory goes sour, with the bitterness of an evil spring, when, for the first time in our war years, our men have to go back, not forward, and find all roads crowded with others doing the same. And what have been comfortable billets—little oases of civilisation in that growing desert—are being dug into trenches. And the French have to come up to hold our bulging, breaking line. Ironical and efficient, they come, and the only comfort is that, if it is bad enough, some end to the business may result.

But no ! So perfect is the machine that in surprisingly short time it is mended, and our men take over again from the French. There are fewer of them now, and the ground they hold is a little further back, the desert is wider, the pitch at which the great engine of mutual destruction whirrs is a little higher.

There seems no reason why it should stop, except that in the long run there will be no men left. But they just go on.

Then, astoundingly, one day it does stop, with a jerk. In that grey November noon the machine is suddenly, uncannily silent.

Men walk about, not ducking nor dodging, doing nothing, perturbed by the change, not really believing in it. Things do have an end, do they, after all ? They do.

Again the signal sounds—the two minutes' silence of 1927 is over !

The ex-soldier of the New Armies opens his eyes, stands up, the business day of the town flows on. Out in the street he goes to watch people coming away from the Cenotaph. Here he meets an American friend, over on business, who has suddenly found no business doing, every one standing bareheaded. The American is deeply moved, keeps on saying it is ' great,' ' very emotional.' Not from the Middle West is he, careless and ignorant of Europe, but from New England ; still feels some bond of common language and culture ; was in France in 1918, would have been there sooner had he been allowed. He says :

' We simply don't know what it means to you ! '

About the two presses the sombrely-clothed, quiet English crowd ; there is no great exhibition of feeling ; tears, if there are any, are hidden, and people are getting back to work with no fuss.

The American clutches his friend's arm :

' Look at that ! '

An old lady, a widow, is passing. Across her dress hang the medals of her two dead sons. There must be thousands like her in these islands. She certainly doesn't think herself extraordinary. But the American, so much quicker and more spontaneous than any Englishman, holds his hat in his hand while she passes.

Everything has an end. Next year, and this day ten years, the same scene will be enacted under our November sky. But then we shall be trying to explain what it means to a new, possibly respectful, but strange and critical generation. And beyond that, the time will come when we, too, shall be gone, like our hoarse friend, and our friend with the pencil, and the boys with the mouth-organs, and the American—and the whole thing will be a memory.

But until life has become a gentler and more reasonable thing, I, at least, must go on, as long as I may, telling the story of how the machine nearly overtook civilisation, and used it up.

V

THE COMMON SECRETARY

An architect called Geoffrey Skene, and a bank clerk called Stephen Dormer, both of them coming from the town of Easthampton in England, met at a cross-roads in French Flanders. It was not a coincidence. Each had a limited yearly holiday. Each was bound, sooner or later, to go back to look at the place where he had been involved in that incredible, unescapable, and most fortunately finished and done with, war. Although slightly acquainted, they had been too English to mention their identical destination to each other, as they met, occasionally, in the streets of their town ; therefore English-like, they met at an otherwise insignificant spot in what their ancestors, who had frequently fought there, had been used to call the Low Countries.

But Skene and Dormer had not come there from any profound interest in the Past, or the place. They had come, English leisure giving rein to English curiosity, to gaze at a spot on earth where they had so nearly died, so accidentally it now seemed, those years ago.

They had not found it.

When Skene came up to Dormer, the latter, formed by years of routine and probity, was surveying a tourist map with some annoyance. Not to be able to find a place, if not in a directory, at least on a map, was outside his experience, even in war-time. Skene, member of a liberal profession, took it lightly; after they had said: 'Hallo, didn't know you were coming here,' both together, and frowned, he admitted:

'Well, I 'm blest if I know where it was.'

'I can't see where I 'm wrong!' replied Dormer, to his map, aggrieved, 'It 's the right distance from the Canal.'

'When were you here?' asked Skene, gazing abroad with trained surveyor's eyes.

'April, '18.'

'Ah. It 's been—knocked about a good bit since then.'

'Yes, but I 'd been here, time and again.'

'Of course, one had to come this way from the Somme to the Salient.'

'Exactly. The village started with a row of little houses. There were no outlying buildings.'

'That 's right.'

'The row of trees beside the *pavé* just left off, and the buildings began. Then, after a bit, you came to the Square.'

'Well, come on,' said Skene, 'let 's pace it out.'

Around them lay the wet richness of Flanders. The road was clear, but about it, the fields had a half-kempt, hummocky appearance.

'A hundred!' counted Dormer. 'We ought to be in the Square. Look here, on the map, where the word—er—kick—and —push——'

'Kieckenpuits!'

'Is that how you pronounce it? We used to call it Kick-an-push—well—against that there 's a cross—that means the church —but where is it?'

'Wait a bit!' cried Skene, his voice rising. 'What are all those bricks—why —Dormer, you old ass—we 're there!'

'Nonsense!'

'Didn't the cobbles go diagonally across the Grand' Place—Well—look here!'

'Um!'

'There 's your church.'

'That—mess, there. It isn't three feet high!'

'That 's the church, all the same. Ah, look there, those corrugated iron roofs— that 's the new village!'

'Well, I 'm——'

'Yes, you are, come along and see.'

Skene led him, still grudgingly regarding his map, through what appeared to be the storeyard of a bankrupt builder, down a muddy lane, where even the cobbles of the Route Nationale ceased.

'This was mined,' said Skene. 'I remember hearing it go up!'

On the wooden door of the first elephant hut was a small but dilapidated tin and enamel notice:

SECRÉTAIRE
COMMUNAL

'There,' said Dormer, 'the Common Secretary as the boys used to call him. I'd quite forgotten him.'

'He hasn't forgotten us. Come on!'

They pushed open the door, and entered.

The interior showed the creditable struggle which minor officialism was making against something so much bigger and more violent than itself. Here, in an army hut, on that abandoned battlefield that had so ruthlessly obliterated the village which was their sole reason for existence, had found shelter a little old man, his office chair, his desk, his stove, his cat, and all those pompous declarations and meticulous printed lists that go to govern rural France. The atmosphere, there in the midst of those

fields, slowly being reclaimed by agriculture, was that atmosphere of theory and ink of those tall buildings that line the Seine.

The little old man went on writing one of the interminable lists peculiar to his kind, in the official purple ink, for some time after the two Englishmen entered. It seemed as though he were allowing the official period to elapse before noticing them. When he did look up, he said nothing, waiting, no doubt, for them to state their business.

'Good-morning, Monsieur Robinet,' began Skene, in French.

'Good-morning!'

'And how are you getting on, and all my good friends, in the Commune of Kieckenpuits?'

'Monsieur, I do not know which persons are designated your friends!'

'Oh, come, you must remember me!'

'No, Monsieur, I have not the pleasure.'

'I was here, in the war!'

'Ah! that!' The little old man sighed and wagged his head, weighted with memories. But apparently not one was of Skene, for he only remarked:

'Yes, we had a heap of English here—and then the Americans.'

'Well, I was Lieutenant Skene. I used

to come and see you about billets and horse lines and all that.'

'Ah! I saw so many. But what is there that I can do for your service?'

'Why, nothing!' Skene sounded a bit crestfallen. 'I 'll go and see some of the farmers. They 'll remember me.'

'It is always possible. Only I would point out that many of my *administrés* have left!'

'All right, I 'll go and see,' repeated Skene, nettled.

'Yes, you can always do that.'

So saying, the little old man gave the stove a poke with an English bayonet that hung on a nail, and resumed writing.

Outside, Skene said to Dormer:

'Just fancy that! I must have seen him hundreds of times!'

'I never had much opinion of the French,' replied his friend. 'I found them very insular!'

They walked on, side by side, for some distance, until they were clear of the huts. On either side of them stretched the fields, queerly distorted as if by earthquake. Hardly a tree was to be seen, but everywhere stumps splintered at the top into a queer fan-shape. They sat on one of these.

'Do you suppose that chap would re-

member?' Dormer was pointing to a figure ploughing the field just beyond them.

Skene made no attempt to find out. The neglect of Monsieur Robinet still burned within him.

'That old man, I used to see him, sometimes as often as once a week. I must say he was a model of his particular sort. He kept wonderful books, containing all sorts of unnecessary details about his *administrés*, as he called them. He knew all their private histories, all their family feuds, and would give sly hints as to which were to be trusted and what might be conveniently hidden from me. Well, the war rolled on and on——'

'Worse, and worse!' agreed Dormer. 'I know.'

'——and finally, in getting out of the Lys Valley, we had to come back this way. You may remember what a game it was, clearing the civilians of half the countryside out, and then making a stand while the army was reconstructed behind us. We were a crew. Details of all sorts. Labour Corps, tunnellers, cooks, scullions, grooms, clerks.

'Well, after about three days of it, we landed up here, at Kieckenpuits. It was empty, of course, doors all open, fires still

burning in the stoves. My C.O. used to swear he found a cat asleep on the hearth of one house. However——'

'I 'd believe anything about those days!' Dormer conceded.

'I hope we set a proper guard. I don't remember much except going into all these houses, and eating and drinking everything we could find. Some sort of scheme of defence was formulated, the road barricaded, we dug in and covered up. And then——'

'I know,' Dormer supplied. 'Old Fritz never came.'

'That 's just it. Had we only known, he had taken some nasty knocks, and the edge of his offensive was already blunted. He was tired of out-marching his guns, and getting it in the neck. We had a peaceful night of it, with the whole Lys Valley below, one great Crystal Palace firework display. Loveliest sight you ever saw!'

'Bit too noisy for me!'

'It was noisy, but wonderful to watch. Then, when it got light, old Fritz found out that we were waiting for him, and he took a dislike to poor old Kieckenpuits—a long range dislike!'

'He was quite right.'

'Of course he was! What was the use

of his walking up the road and being potted. He sat back and started on us with those five-point-nines of his !'

'Nasty quick brutes !'

'Quick ! After the first salvo I got our chaps away from the church, because I realised we were a dot on the map, just the sort of shoot Fritz liked and did so well. I was too soon.'

'Much ?'

'No, about one minute. The next salvo —punctual as clockwork, caught the church tower. Just beside me, a corporal from some East Anglian battalion said : 'My 'eart, thar she goo, wallop.' It was the last word he ever spoke. A piece of stone as big as your head caught him between the shoulders and nearly went through him. It bent his head right over until he was looking backwards, and upside down. Dead, of course. A gunner who was trying to find a place for an O-pip said it was a wonderful shoot. So it was !'

'Old Fritz was wonderful !'

'He was. He went bracketing up and down the main road and the cross roads, just like an old lady planting tulips. He kept on getting our poor devils, at one place or another, and I kept getting 'em away, when I could.'

'I know. Most depressin'.'

'It was. Just about half an hour after we had had too much of it, and I had to begin looking out that not more than two men went with a stretcher, it began to rain.'

'Then Fritz shut up!'

'Pre-cisely. Just like the old lady, thinking it was a horrid wet afternoon, and putting the rest of the tulips back in the box until it faired up!'

'Perfect Godsend, of course.'

'Only just as depressin'. I was tired of it. After four years, to come to that. Well, next thing was a G.S.O. of sorts, from Corps Headquarters on a motor bike. He was earning his keep, that chap, dashing about forming "strong-points." At the moment, of course, Fritz was trying to work round on the low ground, south of us, where there was no one particular to stop him. This merchant took away half the machine-gunners we'd scraped together, promised us some rations, and went off to the right. I sat behind a pigsty—which was my headquarters, billet, and funkhole, and watched the road. Nothing happened for a bit, except a lot of noise. I suppose the G.S.O. stopped the Boche on the right, so the next thing was a commotion in front of us.'

'Machine-gunning, and all that.'

'Just so. I crawled about the churchyard until I found out who was loosing-off our none too plentiful S.A.A. A Labour Corps sergeant, about seventy years old, swore he had seen some one moving, but so far as I could make out, the men were firing to keep their hearts up!'

'Men will do that.'

'Mind you, there was something in it. Fritz was shooting a bit. From the way the stuff was dropping I suspected that a stray Boche machine-gunner, at least a thousand yards off, was warming his tummy for exactly the same reason as ours were. There was nothin' to be done, so I dodged back to my pigsty, where my servant had succeeded in boiling some water, and making a mug of tea.'

'Ah!'

'Yes, nectar, the stinking stuff. While I was scalding my throat out with it, I nearly spilt the lot, for joy. There was some one coming up the road behind us. I soon sobered up, though. It wasn't a limber, it wasn't reinforcements, it was, as it got nearer, a little old man under an umbrella. The rain had ceased, and a miserable sort of sunset struggled through—in Fritz's eyes, fortunately. That made him nervous,

and he started sloshing the whole place. Anyhow, by the time the little old man got up to where I was taking cover, there was any amount of loose lead, ricochetting all over the *pavé*, whee, whee ! '

' I know.'

' So I called out to the chap to stop. He turned, and it was Monsieur Robinet, the Communal Secretary !

' " What are you doing there ? " I called out to him.

' " I am doing my duty. You do yours," he replied, just as cross as two sticks. So I tried him this way, " Have a cup of tea ? "

' " I have no time for foolishness," says he, fumbling his way up the blocks and sandbags of our barricade. The sentry on the barricade was looking at me and at this apparition in the field of battle, alternately. I signed to him " all right " and shouted to old Robinet, as he stood, balancing on his wizened old legs on the pile of stuff we had made—it was a stiff climb for the old man impeded with an umbrella. " Come back," I said, " you 're going to your death ! " '

' " I 'm going to fetch the matrix of the cadastre ! " '

Dormer stared for a moment, and then

recollected—' The land registry thing the Government makes 'em keep.'

' That 's it. Key to the Land Register, we should call it. It was so dam' silly that I jumped over the barricade after him, calling to him to stop. The Boches were tuning up, and the office he used to occupy south of the churchyard—— Let 's see—we are about where the Boches were, that day—it would be there ! '

' Can't make out much,' grunted Dormer, frowning at the non-committal landscape—' It 's all overgrown ! '

' Well, anyhow, I ran after him and caught hold of his umbrella. He left it in my hand and went on. I threw the beastly thing into the ditch. We got across the few yards which led to his office—how, I can't think, we were in full view of the Boche, who at once took the necessary steps, as they say in Staff Memoranda. The air was fairly thick with flying metal, but you remember that old Fritz was never so good at a sporting shot, as on the map. So, amid the cheers of my men, we got to his rotten old office. A whizz-bang had lifted the roof, covered everything with dust, thrown the school-books and official documents to every corner of the place. He went down on his knees, and grubbed

up a trap in the floor. He 'd put the Register in his cellar.

'Meanwhile, of course, ever since we shinned over the barricade, I had been exhorting him to give it a miss, pointing out that the Boche had got his Commune, and might as well have his Cadastral Map and Register. It was no good. He snubbed me—in the middle of that battle of the European War, that little old man told me off as if I were a naughty school kid. "I know quite well what I am doing," he told me. "I have no need of your enlightenment on the subject." I took it in good part until he emerged with his Register, done up in a handkerchief, from his cellar. Then I caught him by the scruff of the neck, pushed him through the back door and up the lane to the Labour Corps machine-gun emplacement. And it was time. While we were hauling him over the sandbags, a five-nine hit the barricade on the road, and knocked it endways. We never found a trace of my poor old sentry. While I was rushing about, seeing after my chaps, old Robinet followed me and kept on pulling at my equipment to attract attention. Do you know what he wanted? His umbrella! "Where is it?" he demanded to know. "Gone to Hell. Go and find it," I told

him. "But you don't understand," he said, "that that umbrella belonged to Monsieur the Maire. What shall one say to him?" I didn't know. I had other things to think of. Just then the gunner fellow managed to get a peep at the Boche, and give his guns a chance. You know how it felt when, just as the whole show seemed lost, you found there was some one else carrying on the war, they hadn't all packed up and gone home. The last I saw of old Robinet, he was trotting off back to St. Omer—or wherever his Maire had moved to. You know also, that that day was the turning point. The Boche never got any further.'

'No. That's why there's nothing worth seeing beyond this. I vote we go home, Skene.'

The two friends got up and shook themselves, and started homewards, amid the incoherent mounds and hasty tin and boarded reconstructions of the gradually obliterated battlefield. As they passed the door that bore the tin sign, Skene said:

'I must say good-bye!' and opened it.

'Good-bye, Monsieur Robinet. I've been telling my friend how you saved the matrix of the cadastre!'

Between the desk and the stove, two old

eyes blinked at him. From the foot-stool the cat's eyes blinked no less.

'Come and have a drink?' shouted Skene, suddenly feeling an urge towards friendliness.

'Thank you, I have not the time to waste,' muttered the old voice. The face was lowered above the papers. They were forgotten.

'Oh! come on,' grumbled Dormer.

They went.

VI

VIRGINIA

Even now, from time to time, there appears in comic papers a figure labelled 'Frenchman'—middling short, round, and sleek, with waxed moustache and imperial—whom all the half-educated know to be immoral and witty. But whenever I think of Virginia—for, if one is to translate her name at all, that is what one must call her—I feel that she is much more representative of France than that labelled figure ever was.

No doubt her name is partly responsible for this feeling. To an American, a Latin, a Celt, there would be nothing out of the way in such a name for a woman. But in England, the real Perfide Albion of Business and the Bible, of Wilberforce and Palmerston, it savours of the old-fashioned, as the real France savours of the time before England drifted out of the European Comity of Nations to pursue her own peculiar path.

The very way in which I made her acquaintance was one which could not have occurred in England. It was thus—I was travelling with a French friend, whose friendship dated from our mutual

boyhood. That is to say, though we spoke more openly and affectionately to each other than two Englishmen would have done, we probably understood each other less thoroughly. Or perhaps it was because we dimly felt that deep impassable barrier within ourselves that we were so frank and cordial. Anyhow, alighting to change at one of those small junctions typical of the third of France north of the wine-growing districts—a rather sooty little station, deeply interested in anthracite and beetroot—he did something that, in spite of a fair knowledge of him and of France, astonished me. We had strolled up to the newspaper kiosk. Not the book-stall. It was not the same thing at all—not a small branch of some gigantic firm which dispatched to it every day what was said to be selling in London. It was the private venture of some obscure person who used individual judgment in the choice of the stock.

Occupied with the wares displayed, I heard my friend break out into one of those shrill exclamations that I had learned to overlook in him because he had never been taught that they were not good form. He took me by the arm. 'My friend, allow me to introduce an old flame of mine!'

Was that what he said? Not a bit of it. What he said was: 'Mon cher, permettez que je vous présente une de mes anciennes maîtresses!' But I cannot translate it better than I have, for a more literal translation, though nearer to the words, would be so unthinkably far from the spirit.

Used, as I considered myself to be, to my friend and to French ways, I had to adjust myself. In England does one introduce the news-vendor to one's friends? I think not usually. But then, in England the news-vendor is frequently a boy, rarely more than a shop assistant. I had only to glance at the person whom my friend had thus brusquely brought into the circle of my bowing acquaintance to see that she was something quite different. She was a woman, not a girl, but a woman who had been a woman ever since she was sixteen—had never had, I think, an adolescence, but had passed from childhood abruptly into a stern school of life to which, with blunt acquiescence and perfect competence, she had immediately adjusted herself. And she had never changed from that first adjustment. As I now saw her, so had she always been.

With us in England, conservatism has to be a political creed. With her, in France,

it was something implicit in the mental composition. France has had her Revolution. Virginia had had her moment of transition. Individually as nationally, the change had been so thorough that its effects were still deemed sufficient.

There were physical incidents which assisted this state of affairs. Virginia had that sort of dark brown hair which greys least and latest of all colours that cover the human head. Her teeth were good, and she had what schoolboys call a 'pudden' face—round, fleshy, of an even pallor, and with no marked redness of lip or sharpness of feature. It might easily have been a stupid-looking face, had it not been lighted by two sharp, round little grey eyes. If she ever blinked, I never saw it, and I should not be incredulous if told that she slept with her eyes open. Again, she might have looked stupid had she let her underlip droop or her jaw hang. But, except in speech, her lips were firmly closed and her chin was thrust a little forward.

I peeped inside her little kiosk, an erection that in England I should have called a 'box o' tricks.' Not unjustly. It was. In the short second or so which was all my island politeness would admit of my spending staring into some one else's

life, I saw a tiny cylinder of match-boarding with a door and glazed windows, obscured by periodicals of every sort and kind hanging against them, except for the small space reserved for the proprietor's face while in parley with the public. Inside were a stool with a cushion upon the seat, a little black stove, glowing red, and one of those flat baskets, in which lay a dog and a cat, both small, both mongrels beyond any hope of redemption, and both lying curled up, one against the other.

'Madame is fond of animals?' said I politely.

She regarded me without any expression.

'But no, monsieur, those are my little companions.'

I retired in confusion. Of course she was not fond of animals. She was fond of those two little beasts because they were hers.

My friend, however, was more used to and less interested in her. He did not speculate about her; he asked plain direct questions, and she replied with answers to match. There was about their short conversation that static quality which I believe is more characteristic of French than of English colloquy. They took each other for granted, had done so for years,

and were not anticipating any fresh developments.

'He is dead, then.'

'Yes, monsieur.'

'You went to the funeral, I bet?'

'But no, I did not go.'

'Not truly?'

'Perfectly. I had said that I would not meet him living; why should I run after him dead?'

Our train came in, and we performed those athletic feats necessary to any one who would board with luggage a French train in any but the largest stations. Panting and perspiring, we settled ourselves at length on the seats. Then, for some reason, there was a delay. Some one blew a tin trumpet and there was the usual shouting, but the train did not start. I had leisure to observe Virginia. Her face was dimly visible in the twilight of her kiosk. Her glance turned, I could imagine, to her stove; to the saucepan upon it, in which leeks were boiling; then to her knitting. Then, as some customer bought his two or three sous' worth of papers, that face, as it were, came to the surface, pallid as the underside of a fish; she pursed her lips ever so little over the giving of change, regarding the silver handed her—

and the notes even more so—with fully the necessary suspicion ; and again her face, with arm and shoulder in their garment of vague grey check—I should not like to commit myself as to its nature ; it was something between a dressing-gown and an ulster—disappeared into the half-light peculiar to her habitat.

Eventually the train did start, but I found I could not leave her behind. I questioned my friend.

'You have known that person a long while ?'

'I believe you. Virginia, she is like the good God—eternal !'

'She is always there, doing just that ?'

'Necessarily.'

'Even on Sunday ?'

'Naturally. The station does not shut, except for some hours of the night. While it is open, she is there !'

'She does not go to church ?'

'It is probable. But the church is open from five-thirty to midnight. Thus she has time.'

'It does not seem much of a life.'

My friend looked at me, and remembered that I came from a country where they had invented a thing called in England 'the eight-hour day' and in France 'the English

week '—that and a whole lot of things like insurance, pensions, and Factory Acts.

'Ah, you must remember we are not so rich here as you in England. We have to work harder.'

'As you like. But what does it amount to? What will happen when she can no longer sell papers?'

'Oh, as for that, at the worst there is always the Refuge of the Aged. I do not think it will come to that. She has, without doubt, her savings.'

'I hope so. She must cheat herself at each meal to have even that!'

'In France one has the habit. Saving—it is our economic salvation.'

'It is very hard on the individual.'

'There is something you will never understand. The little that all these have, it is their very own. They do not say "Thank you" to any one!'

This was a floorer. Obviously true; and no answer except to say, 'Change your way of life.' And what good is it when one nationality says that to another? But I was still interested.

'What do you suppose makes a woman take to a job like that?'

'My faith! The same thing as in England—a void in the interior.'

'Yes, but don't you see, that woman would be so much better off as a servant or employée of some one else.'

'It is possible, but she will never believe you.'

'I suppose not. I gather she had some tragedy in her life?'

'You mean——'

'I overheard your conversation with her. She has lost a relative?'

'Oh, that. It was not a tragedy. It was very ordinary.'

'How?'

'She has lost her brother; but she is not sorry.'

'Family quarrels?'

'If you wish. Virginie and Léon Debreu were left orphans. Their father and mother had a little shop in the rue de la Clef d'Or. Léon demanded the partition of the estate and there was no legal obstacle, so he got it. Virginie said that she would never see him again, and she never did. Relatives tried to bring them together, but it was useless. Léon, I think, repented of his hardness, and would have made it up, but she would not.'

'But they lived in the same town?'

'Yes, and Léon frequently entered the station, on account of his business.'

'How did she manage, then, not to see him?'

'She said to herself that he existed no longer.'

'And now he is dead?'

'Yes. What she had always said would happen arrived at last. It was not a miracle.'

'And she didn't go to his funeral?'

'No, she did not go.'

'They were both very hard!'

'One is like that in France.'

That trip came to an end a few days later, and on our return journey we changed again at the junction. It was late, but the watchful face was on duty in the kiosk, so sited as to obtain the light of one of the station lamps without need of more particular illumination. My friend saw me peering in that direction and supplemented my thoughts.

'Yes, she is still there.'

'What strikes me about her is that there is not a soul in the world who cares if she is or not!'

'What would you? She has no relatives left.'

'And no memories of any one, since her father and mother died?'

'As to that, one never knows. But it is not probable, since she had no dowry.'

'It seems a lonely life.'

'It is in her character. She would not go well together with another.'

Years passed and much happened before I went that way again, and went alone. But no revolution had struck the railway system of France, and I had to get out at that station in order to have the pleasure presently of getting on an even slower train. I walked up to the newspaper kiosk and, seeing a strange face at the wicket, asked for Mademoiselle Debreu. I had hardly uttered the question before it was answered—as questions are often answered in France, as if it were a public duty—by three people. One was a woman of the same category but without the character of the Virginia she had supplanted. One was a pompous but cheery commercial traveller. One was an incredibly dirty old man who could be perceived twenty metres away to be the lamp-cleaner. They took the job of informing me in a sort of round, as though singing a catch.

'Ah, that person—she is deceased.'

'It isn't common sense, but it is true all the same,' continued the second.

'You may say that she began to make old bones,' added the lamp-cleaner, looking

like one of those people to be seen in Cruikshank's plates, but never in the England that any of us remember. Whether it was the effect of environment or no, I went on, to my own astonishment :

'Did any one go to her funeral ?'

It started them off again. Round they went.

'Oh yes, sir. She had superb obsequies !'

'The College of Orphans paraded !'

I had a vision of little boys in blue and little girls in brown, marching two and two, but the third part—of the Lampiste—overrode it.

'I will explain that to you, sir. She lost her two little companions ; you had seen them, sir ? Yes ; well, not wishing to take others, she gave herself to good works.'

And round again :

'She was a pious lady.'

'She had not much, but she gave it,' went on the commercial, throwing floods of light on the parable of the widow's mite. Of course, the virtue was in the triumph over a lifelong habit of holding tight.

The descendant of Eros concluded : 'One might say, she made a good ending !'

For me, at any rate, that is true.

VII

THE FLEMISH BORDER

THOSE opinionated men who ran the French Revolution divided France into departments. Of all those departments none is so straggling as that called Le Nord. The upper portion of it, containing the arrondissements of Hazebrouck and Dunkirk, is almost severed from the rest. And rightly; for it is an ethnological frontier, where the mysterious race sometimes described uncertainly as Celts, but more definitely by Cæsar as Gauls, stands divided from a non-Gaulish race of more recently northern origin. The land and the people have the distinction of a strong local type. Have not all peasant communities a strong local flavour? Certainly, but generally as a result of their undisturbed isolation. On the other hand, the French-speaking farmers of that strip of the Department du Nord owe their special character to the fact that they have never been undisturbed or remote. Of all the picturesque catchwords of the history books of our school-days, none was so exact, certainly none so vivid, as the description of those marches as 'the cockpit

of Europe.' True, that term was applied to the Lombard Plain with as much superficial exactitude, but with how much less weight ; for the battles fought in Northern Italy were so often to redress the balance of some denomination, to give effect to some political project. The battles of the Flemish border had all the inevitableness that belongs to racial conflicts, the importance that attends decisions that govern the language or religion of a continent for centuries. It was on these low plateaux, so slightly raised above the rivers that empty into the North Sea, that the ambitions of Spain, of France, and finally of Germany to dictate to Europe have been cut short. This is the first and predominant characteristic of these people. They are borderers. They have the tenacity and caution that characterises Carlisle and Dumfries. Over and over again the political boundary has been shifted. The Austro-Spaniards under Alva must have built these towers one sees along the Lys at Aire, Merville and Estaires, at Bailleul, Hazebrouck, and Bergues. Now, for the last 150 years France has thrown its centralised government and invincible language over these parts. But only superficially, for one hears complaints : ' One is more *pratique* in Belgium.' The

tongues these people speak are even more puzzling. To the younger generation French has been well taught in the schools, where the masters (it cannot be entirely a coincidence) are always 'strangers' from St. Omer or beyond. But in the family, and by the elders, Flemish is still spoken, and often Flemish alone. And what a Flemish! It seems to vary almost with each village. The Belgians of Courtrai, the poorer classes of Lille, cannot understand it. At Esquelbecq is an old, old, wooden windmill. If you ask its owner to read the inscription carved over the door, he will reply, 'Ah! I cannot. It is Vlamsch!' 'But don't you speak Flemish, at home?'—'Yes, but I can't read that sort there!'

Again, in the slopes of the Mont des Cats, the backbone of that slight ridge between the Yser and the Lys, runs a lane called 'Vlaming Strat.' Why? Obviously to identify it, to people not Flemings. But whoever they were, they have been so long forgotten that now the name exists in Flemish only. Similarly 'Ferme L'Espagnole' is a moated grange, with water still about it, with 300-year-old walls, 3 feet thick, built by an Austro-Spanish general in order that Neapolitan

mercenaries should keep Frenchmen out of Holland. Remoter and even more forgotten are the Roman roads, and, reminiscent of the Crusades, those old farmhouses called 'La Commanderie,' where Templars lorded it over those rich wet meadows and these dumb, defiant people.

But civilisation has, after all, its advantages. The Austro-Spanish Empire may be nearly as forgotten as the Holy Knights, but 'the cockpit of Europe' holds now some of the richest and best tilled fields in the Continent. There is nothing languorous about the climate. The cold and damp of the North Sea bid the borderer be stirring if only to keep his blood warm. He does stir to some purpose, and not unaided. There is little or no real peasant ownership in that square of country that lies between the sea and the Lys, the Aire-Gravelines canal, and the Belgian border. The land is owned by landlords approximating to the English model, and mainly Belgians. The usual tenancy is half-yearly, the average holding about 200 acres, English, the yearly rent often as high as 50 francs pre-War—2l. for the 'mesure,' which very roughly equals our acre. Very roughly, for let the French Government lay it down, generation after generation, never so strictly, that the super-

ficial area unit is the hectare, the farmer of these parts goes on dealing with his land by ' mesure,' that holds a varying number of ares in nearly every commune. Over the canal westward, or over the river to the south, you soon come to the real peasant—the man in rags and sabots, whose one boast is that he can tell you to get off his tiny plot of land. But the borderer has a more real sense of value, similar to that to be found in Scotland. You may call him *only* a tenant farmer if you like, but he has good clothes and boots, and money in the savings bank, and pays rent regularly to M. le baron for the best land in the world.

What crops ! People who think of France as a wine-growing country should stop at Steenvoorde –for choice, on a Saturday in the autumn :—All the potatoes of Midlothian, the grain of York, the hops of Kent (these latter grown on stout wires stretched on great timbers like telegraph poles) ; and besides, sugar beet, that England is only just beginning to think about ; chicory, that has had to be legislated against because it was displacing grain on account of its extreme profitableness ; and flax—flax, the lovely eyebright flower, the delicate green plant, difficult to grow ; then the straw-like bundles, soaking in every

pool, turning the water to ink. Finally, if you are both patient and inquisitive, you will see some day an old man or woman beating out the golden silky fibre like children's curls, on a smooth, worn old hand-wheel, and you will know how *linen* got its name. Then there are the berries—for oil.

The live stock looks familiar enough, but is very much more strictly used than in England. The typical big-boned white horse may be seen harnessed to the handy 'cultivator' with a jennet. If you tell Jerome Vanderlynden about Mr. Collings' 'three acres and a cow,' he will say ponderously that one acre is enough. And you will see his cows tethered, so that they eat what they are allowed and not what they like.

With pigs and fowls the strictness takes another form. Neither time nor attention, food nor house room is wasted on them. They do what they can for themselves before they are killed. There are, in that corner of the earth, no sheep. Two flocks perambulate the roads, eating from the sides of the ditches. If you ask Achille Delbaere why, he will look at you and say: 'But, sir, we have no land poor enough to put beneath sheep. Over by St. Omer, that may be all very well; but here—No!'

It certainly looks as if he were right. From the Forêt de Nieppe, on the south, to the sluice-gated marshes that surround Dunkirk, you may, if you look hard enough, find some few acres of ground in each commune that are doing nothing more exciting than growing timber : that does not mean that the trees just grow until some one thinks of forestalling Nature by cutting them down. Those woods are regularly marked off into areas and cut according to size and age, by which they can be marketed. With much difficulty may there be found some of the steeper slope of Mont Noir, Mont des Cats, or Mont Cassel where nothing grows. And there you will find quarries.

But Achille's great grievance is those Holland elms that the baron has insisted on growing all round the pasture. They suck up all the manure. It cuts Delbaere to the heart, for, unused and unwilling to show his feelings, manure is the one thing about which he is really enthusiastic. Not only the golden store that lies rotting beneath the windows of his living-room, in sight of which he never loses heart, and from which he appears to draw inspiration, but all those chemical compounds, sulphates and nitrates, that a fatherly Government ensures his obtaining—for in this, at least, he has

moved with the times. They are wasted on his landlord's trees.

May it then be said that here, at last, is to be found the earthly Paradise, where Peace and Plenty till the smiling plain? The inhabitants think so, and cannot bear to leave it for 'foreign parts,' by which they mean other departments of France. Families are larger here than in any part of France, and the surplus goes to Lille or Dunkirk. There is no emigration. And Belgians who occasionally find their way in are marked men, held a little aloof by the native born. The local gentry, small nobles whose families and seats the French Revolution appears never to have obliterated, thrive there; and well they may, for in what part of the world is one better fed? The one grievance of the titled classes (if they may be so called—they approximate much more nearly in habits and outlook to the squirearchy of Fielding) is the disabilities under which sport suffers. There is shooting, but the farmer, it is bitterly complained, poaches the hare or rabbit, and if he finds a partridge nest, sets his heavy nailed boot upon it. No sportsman he, and not likely to waste good marketable produce on the beasts of the soil or the birds of the air. But the solid little moat-defended châteaux are

rarely empty, and the upper classes being more volatile than the lower, here as elsewhere, it is in these that you will find the few strangers who have gained admittance—factory owners from Lille, or successful lawyers. The attitude towards sport brings out perhaps better than anything all that an Englishman deplores in the life of these parts.

Yet, for those who can afford to hire it, some amount of mixed shooting exists. But for the ' people,' as they would be called in England, there is nothing—no cinema ; cricket and football, of course, are unknown, and the weekly visit to market, instead of being the occasion, as with us, of spending, of which some proportion is always for pure enjoyment, is a hard business of making money and banking it. The men, of course, do, some of them, sit in the *estaminet*. The really gay spirits on Sunday afternoons gather round a 40-foot pole and shoot arrows at the objects mounted on it. But national dress and local dances seem to have disappeared with equal completeness. There are pictures of the saturnalia of the old-time fair at Cassel ; but Cassel is moss-grown, half deserted. There are tales of the wakes of Hazebrouck ; but who goes to them now ? Solid acquisition is the order of the day.

Some effort, no doubt, is being made to revive, or rather invent, a carnival week for Malo-les-Bains, grim suburb of Dunkirk. But it is for visitors. No, the Flemish border is not gay. On the other hand, it is extremely devout. In the smaller villages the old churches linger with cracked chimes in bat-ridden belfries. But in all the larger and more prosperous ones a big new church of red brick has been built within the last half-century. The church-going is wonderfully general, not left to the women by any means. And the last relic of the old joyful mediæval tradition lingers perhaps in the processions of Easter and Whitsun and in a certain pomp of ritual. Even in religious observance the curious dual nature of the borderland creeps in. At Wormhout the Easter sermon is given in Flemish first, then in French. And these exercises, so far as the cursory observer can discover, are the only alleviations of a life that, although it contains no starvation and a good deal of small independence, is monotonous to a degree almost impossible to conceive. Granted that healthy man, brought up to agriculture by primeval methods, can find a fair contentment in seeing his crops heavy and unspoiled, in the knowledge that they have been harvested without loss and sold

without sacrifice, yet what of the women? Where are the gay scarves and vineyard songs of the South? Their work, however much they may do in the fields, lies necessarily and properly within those old damp houses, so many of them still moat-surrounded or standing upon the dyke of the canal. How damp and cold those tile floors must be, how dark the scullery kitchen with its small window upon the midden. Never a carpet, much less a book, picture or musical instrument, to be seen; and if there be an armchair, the master sits in it. Or again, in those little towns smaller than many an English village, what of the sombre faces that look out on you, a moving object on those few square yards of 'Grand' Place' that alone are visible from that particular doorway, a woman's world, while the man is in his workshop—not silent, not without means of avoiding thirst? Him you may hail as you pass, and he will sometimes respond, especially if he wants anything: 'Aha! It's you, my good sir. Wait a moment; I will walk with you as far as the "Sapeur Pompier" and we will have something to take!'

The woman, if you happen to find her alone, will gravely offer you a chair in the best room while she finds the man of the

house. It is not that Eastern ideas have penetrated France and throttled Liberty. Not at all. It is a very free country. The sum-total of Freedom is as high as in any other. But it is divided up so equally that everybody gets only a tiny bit : for the man, business, for the woman, domesticity, fill life amply full. Hence the extraordinary ascendancy which the notary, the local lawyer, has established. There is no competition, and he has to deal with the slow-minded farmer, whose thinking power is limited to thinking twice before parting with cash. As one moves among these people one does not wonder any longer at the difficulties attending direct taxation in France.

It is said that a different spirit is coming over them, and that the younger generation is leaving the land. Confronted with the possibility of the eventual disappearance of these folk, one's feelings are mixed. Admiration, yes, of course. Emulation—No ! If and when they go, France will feel it. But only for the worse ? One wonders. They produce immeasurably more than they consume. But are they not part of a dead weight of reaction that serves France so ill ? At any rate, one need not decide for or against them in a hurry. Be the process

good or bad, it will take a long time. For many a year they will go on, ignoring Lille and Dunkirk, scoffing at St. Omer, content to be ruled by their curé, their baron, their notaire. They have survived many 'European' wars and centuries of evolution. They will survive many more!

VIII

THE OLD MAN'S CHAIR

Why on earth he had come back there, Skene could not for the life of him make out. He was not enjoying it, had not expected to enjoy it. But surely enough, all those years since the day when, with an air of tragic finality, he had put off his khaki, and put on an ill-fitting civilian suit that had been his best in another life, he had known with increasing certainty, that, sooner or later, he would go back there. And here he was, almost against his wish.

He had not regained control over his thoughts and actions until he reached Ypres. In that place, sheer revolt had cleared his brain and braced his will. Nothing during the journey thither had prepared him for what he found there. Boulogne, never damaged, had only the great cranes on the quay to remind him. Calais had shell-holes, but little else. At St. Omer he had picked up the main way to the Front as he remembered marching it or going by train. There were those solid villages amid the rich fields. Then Hazebrouck, looking mended-up, then more

villages. Finally Poperinghe, the obscure market town that for so long had been Railhead. Even then he did not grasp what had happened.

When, with a beating heart, and nerves that fluttered at the slightest sound that resembled the awful crashes he associated with that journey, he got out at Ypres, he had to stop a moment to look round. He had never been there by daylight, and might have had some difficulty in recognising the hastily rebuilt and reinhabited town that he had known only as an ever-yawning tomb. But what rendered it totally unrecognisable was the crowd. To him Ypres was a place of hurrying parties and hastily carried stretchers. He now found it filled with a population that seemed to have come from Blackpool and Ostend, a people of cameras and guide-books, curious souvenir hunters and bored sightseers, herded and jostled in and out of restaurant and exhibition by uniformed couriers shouting of things he had never heard of, describing a state of affairs that had never existed. He had seen many aspects of the War. He knew that it had its commercial side. But that its grisly remains should be sold, in peeps, at a franc a time, like a mixture of Pepper's Ghost and the Morgue, had never occurred

to him. He glared at the hucksters, 'mutilés' and cheap-jacks. They regarded him unmoved, and went on selling their faked products of the 'Battle of Ypres' to those who knew no better. He longed to seize one of the megaphones he saw so freely used, and shout: 'There never was a battle here; this place never was within bullet range of the trenches!'

But he restrained himself. They wouldn't believe him. They didn't know. Those who did know were mostly dead. These people were buying for pleasure, and selling for a living. Incidentally some of the money that was changing hands would go to rebuild the town he had seen so cruelly destroyed. That was right enough. Why shouldn't it be so? He was there for his own private reasons—the chief of which was that he couldn't keep away. And besides, he had no need to buy. He knew where the real thing was. And, shouldering his way through the crush, he made for the Ramparts, beyond which lay the actual trenches of the longest and most intense battle of the War. He knew them better than the streets of Ypres, had held, at one or another time, every yard of them. Where should he go? to some spot that he could identify and have to himself. He soon

thought of it—Kruystraat—on the map, Hell-Fire Corner to him and his—the cross-roads of the insignificant hamlet that had never figured in any despatch, through which the reserve line used to run, and from which the ground sloped away rearward as much as it ever sloped in that dank and dangerous corner they called the Salient. He would see the whole sector from there. It would not be of much benefit, but it would be a sort of expiation. After that he would go home.

He was right. Once outside that celebrated gate and on the newly-made-up road, the crowd dwindled, and soon ceased. After a few hundred yards he had the place to himself, and walked a little uncertainly, looking at the patches of reclaimed land, amid the weed-covered acres of wastage still to be cleared, starting horribly at the explosions of the finds of the Salvage Corps, still at work by the canal, destroying buried duds. With some difficulty he identified the spot, and here he was. Any happier? Not a bit. There was nothing there. The trenches were gone, much of the ground cleared, a sign-post erected, and beyond it ran two lines of corrugated roofs, and timber walls of the new village. That was all. What had he expected? Nothing. Well, he

had found—Nothing. He could go home now.

But before he did so, he must stroll and think for a moment. He lit his pipe, and passed slowly down the reconstructed street. Mostly unrecognisable, yet it enabled him, by the gaps left, and by the lie of the land, to call up some vision of what the place had been like, during the various stages at which he remembered it. At the end was the cross-roads that gave the place its name. Here had been the front line. He need go no further. A wooden paling of the sort that surrounded plots that were claimed, but not occupied, as yet, by the former owners, suited him to sit on, and there he ruminated on the little known corner where he had so nearly left his bones, as many a better man had done—witness the cemetery, a hundred yards further on. Years ago, studying architecture, he had had a nightmare of town-planning, a site which kept on changing as fast as he laid it out. Well, Kruystraat was the nightmare come true. When first he had come to France, he had met men who had billeted in the village, who remembered civilians being there. Then the line had been pushed back. Even so, he himself remembered the skeletons of houses lining

the streets, when he first came up, new to the trenches. Here, where he sat, there had been a bigger house, and the remains of a board with some name on it—Dekonynck, Brasseur, he thought—but it had soon been broken up. He would have forgotten it, had he not remembered that young Mansfield made some sort of silly joke about the name, so that, from his vague knowledge of Flemish, he had explained that it was the equivalent of Fitzroy in English, and that the fellow was a brewer.

He smiled, and then jumped as he had never jumped in the trench that used to run a few feet from him. His eyes had been wandering over the half-reclaimed plot on the rails of which he was seated. At the back was a hut—ex-military stores—the kind of thing that people put up, and put up with, until they could rebuild their houses. Just in front of it stood an iron garden chair, the sort that goes with ' rustic ' work, small greenhouses, middle-class leisure. That was what made Skene jump. That, undoubtedly, was what he had come all this way to see. He knew that chair. It was the only thing he could recognise. Twisted, flaked, dented, chipped, scored with thousands of bullet and shrapnel

marks, bleached livid with gas, it was the chair he remembered. Its seat was half gone, one leg was short, but there could be no doubt about it. It was the same chair. At last he had found something remaining over from those days. And, twisting round upon the fence, he sat and surveyed that surviving article of furniture.

He had first seen it on that autumn evening of 'fifteen, when his battalion had taken over that sector. Having seen rations distributed, he had gone out to meet young Forrest, the Divisional R.E. who was to superintend the fatigues—digging of drains for the waterlogged gullies of trenches—for that night. He knew Forrest slightly, and they had gone together, just where he now sat, into the garden next the brewery, where such brickwork as remained screened them partially from sight by day, and from machine-gun fire by night. Forrest had just been saying :

' Well, make your chaps work. Because, although I have to look after these ruddy trenches, I don't have to live in 'em, you know ! '

Skene had replied something, but Forrest exclaimed :

' Dammit, that was a near one ! '

' What 's up ? '

'Sniper, cut through the band of my puttee!'

It was then that they had stumbled across the chair.

'Very convenient!' remarked Forrest, and sat down, to readjust his leg-wrappings.

Skene had wanted to say 'Don't sit there!' He had a curious aversion to using absent civilians' furniture, hated to see dug-outs full of borrowed bedsteads, with looted pictures and mirrors and stoves all about. It had been silly; these things were bound to have been smashed up, or taken by some one. But the fact was, he had been, he now supposed, a thorough civilian, hating the War and all its ways. However, he did not argue with Forrest. Nor had Forrest argued with him. After a moment or two, getting no reply to the next question, he had groped, by the flickering light of star-shells, across the tossed and broken space, and found Forrest lying beside the chair, shot through the spine.

It had been unpleasant, but too usual to make much impression until his battalion was relieved, at the end of their turn, plus a day or two, by a Midland unit. The officer commanding the platoon that had taken over from his own, was a keen, pushing youngster from a Black Country

town, who referred to the enemy as 'those customers,' but was capable enough. As they finished going over the flimsy and dilapidated defences, and checked the ever depleted and renewed list of trench stores, the boy noticed the old iron chair, and before it was possible to prevent him, had walked across to it, asking :

'D'you include this—chair, iron-bottomed, officer's, for the use of . . . ?'

'I shouldn't stand there,' Skene had called to him, 'I believe they 've got it taped. . . .'

But the boy was yawning, such a queer, high-pitched yawn, his arms drawn convulsively above his head, then collapsing, with three holes, clean through heart and lungs, and much blood. Skene had hastily called for a stretcher, cautioned the sergeant, and hurried after his own platoon.

It had been weeks before, in the dreary infinitesimal shiftings of that part of the War, Skene had come back precisely to that sector. The old chair was very much where he had left it, and in taking over from the company he was relieving, he had nodded towards it.

'The Boche can draw a bead on that ?'

'Can they no' ?' had been the Scots answer. 'The major fancied it for his

dug-out, but he 'd no sooner got it there than a six-inch lifted it out. Two killed. I 'd not go near it, if I were you ! ' And so, through weeks and months, in and out of the same or neighbouring trenches, he found that the chair had attained a sort of malevolent notoriety, could himself hardly refrain sometimes, when foodless, sleepless, or more than usually bombarded, from a feeling as though the empty seat were occupied by a sinister presence. Then, the Allies taking the initiative, he had moved away, far into other battlefields, other jobs. But he had never quite forgotten that piece of furniture, would inquire from those who had been in front of Ypres, and more than once had been assured that it was still to be seen. The War was changing, the Army also. Those who, like sailors, live in continual danger, become—superstitious ? Well, say fanciful. The great Volunteer Army of Britain became like that ! The chair at Hell-Fire Corner acquired a name like the stables at Hooge, or the mill at Laffaux, a grim association with innumerable deaths, and years of hopeless efforts. Then, the later and more frantic offensives rolled further afield, and he had forgotten it, and now here it was !

Nonsense ! He had let his pipe out,

standing there wool-gathering. The explanation was clear enough. The chair was just exactly too small for a direct hit by big shells, too big to be destroyed by small ones, too heavy to be carted away by infantry. Naturally, it had remained where it was, and now the owners would get it back. Who had a better right? They must have suffered enough, poor devils! having their homes destroyed. That would take a lot of 'reparations.' Yet, having reached this conclusion, he lingered on and on, with a feeling that he had something yet to know before he left Hell-Fire Corner.

And sure enough, he heard behind him the sound of wheels, and at the very palings where he stood, there drew up a little old—'shay' he would have called it—drawn by a white pony. From this descended a round, clean-shaven old man, with that particular certainty of expression only to be found in countries where large sections of the population are peasants and priests. Hitching the reins over the gate-post, this person undid the padlock, entered the enclosure, and moving slowly but confidently across, seated himself in the chair, and proceeded to fill and light a long-stemmed pipe. It was not until he had done so, that he perceived Skene, who had

remained rooted to the spot. To him, the presence he had always associated with the chair had materialised. This conversation ensued :

' Good-day, sir,' from the old man. ' It 's beautiful weather.'

' Yes.'

' You are a foreigner ? '

' Yes.' Skene blushed slightly.

' A *touriste* ? '

That he could not stand.

' I came back to see the place,' he said lamely.

' How ? You have travelled here ? '

' I was here in the War.'

' Ah, that ! ' The old man considered a moment some thought which seemed very remote, and went on :

' What a misfortune ! I had a beautiful brewery here ! '

Skene felt compunctious. He had carted away the old man's bricks, burnt his woodwork for kindling, dug up his land for trenches. He could only think of :

' But now this is over, you will be able to start again ? '

To his astonishment the old man shook his head.

' I shall not bother ! (*Pas la peine*),' and at Skene's incredulous look, explained:

'A brewery, it is never a bad job. When the English came, it was even a very fine business. They are great drinkers. I sold all I could brew, and even drew my well dry in making it. But I saw it could not last. The German, you see, is pertinacious. I said to myself, Let them fight, I will leave them to it. I took my money. I went south and set up in munitions. It was even better than brewing. You used plenty of munitions, you others!'

'Yes,' Skene was seeing Forrest lying by the iron chair, but it was only the shadow on the ground. The old man grew philosophic.

'It is like that, the human race. I know. I remember 1870. There are two ages of man, the active, and the discreet. I am of the last.' He yawned, raising his hands above his head. On the wall of the shed, in shadow, Skene saw the Midland boy raise his hands, heard his gurgling cry. No, it was the old pony, snuffling.

'You think you did something, you others, by fighting. I know better. It will all be put straight and forgotten. You feel satisfied, no doubt?'

'Most of us are dead,' Skene answered, and turned away. The words, 'It is quite

natural ' followed him, as he strode towards Ypres.

The little old Flemish town, half rebuilt and ever shapely, glowed in the sinking sun. But to Skene every spot of shadow was a little old man, seated and complacent, in an arm-chair. They dotted the canal bank, the road, and the railway ; with the eye of vision he could see them dotting the continent, the neutral countries, the Americas. They had won. They had come to sit and philosophise. They were right. The active age, the youth of Europe, had gone teeming past them, never so thickly anywhere as in this Salient of Ypres. There, from Roulers, all the youth of Germany, from Poperinghe, all that of Britain and its Allies, had met in a frenzy of heat and endeavour. To allow them to do so, the little old men had shifted their seats, gone off with the money, set up in munitions. The Age of Youth had cancelled itself out. The Age of Discretion had waited, while the flurry echoed away to death, and then came back to claim its reparations, its little bit of land, and to expand its philosophy. Why had he ever pitied them ? Now that he reflected, it was they, the little old men, each sitting on his chair, on his bit of money or land, in

his chancellerie, his bureau, his office, who made wars. Not Youth. When had he, Skene, quarrelled with a German, a French, or any other youth he had met? Youth was too generous, too busy, had no property to protect, no philosophy to justify.

The War was over, Youth was gone. He had learned his lesson. He would not come there again. He would have no need. He knew now what had haunted that piece of garden furniture during all those nights of feverish energy. An old man sitting in a chair!

IX

THE HORSE MARINES

The Division changed sector, and took up a portion of the line to the south of the Lys flats. D Company was in reserve, and held what, in the defence scheme of those days, was known as a 'keep.' This was a quadrilateral entrenchment embracing the ruins of a village that bordered each side of the *pavé* road, which, at this point, was actually higher than the surrounding water-meadows. The houses had nearly all been shelled flat and the brick rubble had been built into considerable breastworks, the theory being that if the low-lying front and support lines were forced, machine-gun fire could be directed toward either flank to hold up further penetration.

Thomas and Skene were sufficiently broken in to the daily routine to see at once where the weakness of such a position lay. The 'keep' was visible to the (as always) rather higher ground occupied by the Boche machine-guns, while the front and support lines were practically hidden. This meant that the place was carefully and systematically registered and enfiladed, at

such a range that the bullets dropped almost vertically behind every available cover, and the only places of safety were the cellars of the larger houses, whose bulging ground floors held the fallen walls of the upper storeys and were thus impermeable to small-arm fire. The night upon which the company took up this position was fairly quiet, as a relief was also going on, behind the German lines. Thomas and Skene took great pains to keep every one under cover during daylight, the only untoward incident being that the chassis of an ammunition lorry, hit and burnt out the week before, gave some careful German artilleryman the impression of a badly concealed gun, so that he shelled it with the patient accuracy of his race, and demolished it after about four hours.

This did not greatly disturb Thomas or Skene, who had in fact had the wreck pushed a good hundred yards back, up the road, during darkness, so that the shelling was well clear of the 'keep.' Thomas's main preoccupation had been the possibility of gas, as the cellars, he foresaw, would be the first places to 'stink out.'

On the second evening, just as Skene had seen the returning ration parties safely clear of the exposed roadway, and was

thankfully making his way toward the Company Headquarters, his mind saturated with the single thought of supper, he was disconcerted by a noise as of a fender and fire-irons being dragged across a cobbled yard, which grew, obviously approaching. He waited a moment under some sagging railings upon which a board lettered 'Brasserie' still hung in cruel mockery, until a runner came from the rear barrier of the street, stumbling upon him.

'Sergeant says, will you look here, sir!'

Skene went back to the barrier, to find an odd-looking vehicle, motor cab in front, flat behind, manned by roundish figures of men.

Before he could speak, he was asked: 'Ich lieden sie manachton hier.'

The thought danced through his mind that the Boche had taken him in the rear:

'Cover them!' he called to the guard, loosening his Colt.

The voice came again.

'Is Leading Seaman Ashton here?'

Even then it is doubtful if he would have understood, had his eye not caught the letters R.N. painted on the cab, while Thomas ranged beside him:

'All right, message just through from Brigade!'

'Is that you, Captain Thomas? Nolan speaking.'

'Draw back this knife-rest, sergeant. It 's the Experimental Officer from Division. This is Mr. Skene, Mr. Nolan. What can we do for you?'

Divested of his oilies, seated in Company Headquarters with a cigar and a drink, the newcomer soon made himself known. He wore a khaki uniform with naval badges. He had been sent or lent by the Navy to forward the perfection of trench explosives. At that date there was still much difficulty in getting enemy wire effectively cut. He had produced an apparatus called 'Nolan's Armadillo'—a flat plank on little wheels, actuated by clockwork, which was supposed to travel across No-Man's Land until the trigger on its back caught in the Boche wire and ignited its charge. He had brought a quantity of these devices, and proposed to try them without further delay. Bluff, apple-cheeked, confident, his conversation would have been most heartening to officers who had not seen armies fail, who were bitten by the obvious futility of Brigade 'shows,' and whose main business was to keep the daily and nightly casualties inevitable in the ordinary course of getting rationed and covered from fire, below the

rate at which reinforcements could arrive. Thomas voiced their doubts.

'I 've no orders to follow this up. I can give you a fatigue party and a guide to A Company who hold the front line, but you don't expect to do more than make a minor raid, do you ? '

'Not a bit. Just touch off my little pets and watch old Fritz's hair stand on end ! '

'I see. Your men have their rations, I suppose ? '

Mr. Nolan wiped his mouth expressively.

'They 've a jorum of Nelson's blood ! '

The detail was soon settled. Mr. Nolan with his Yeoman and Leading Seaman and other ratings, went forward with a guide, and a fatigue party carrying things looking like old-fashioned dumb-waiters from some commercial hotel. The motor conveyance went home with the sound as of the Eiffel Tower falling down. Skene and Thomas watched them go.

'The Boche must know all about it by now ! '

'Sounds like it. Did you wink at me, Skene, when I said "Experimental Officer" ? '

'Got a boatswain in m' eye, or something. What 's "Nelson's blood" ? '

'Bovril and rum, half and half, I believe!'

'Half what?'

'I 'm going to doss down now, but I 'll be up before stand-to!'

'Good-night!'

Thomas *was* up before stand-to. It was a little after midnight, and Skene had been round the keep for the second time, had dismissed some working parties, and was just reflecting that he had heard nothing of the Experiment, when the cellar shook. One, two, three, four, right into the left half of the keep, five-nines at least. Sound of running, and the shout of 'stretcher-bearer!' Getting out, Skene found the road which he had left quiet and empty five minutes before, whipped with machine-gun fire. His company sergeant-major had already got men with shovels to work. A cellar had been knocked in. Of course the brick mounds on very ordinary wooden flooring wouldn't stand five-nines. Fortunately for Skene, the necessity for action helped him. He was soon beside the diggers, but before he could hear if something human were still stirring below that mass of débris, the next salvo came—one, two, three—and four was right among the

digging party. He picked himself up bruised, half stunned, mouth full of mud, and ran into Thomas.

'This won't do. We must clear these cellars!'

The Germans, evidently alarmed by the Experiment, were searching for possible reinforcements, but their guns, firing at a range of many miles, owing to some tiny change in wind and atmosphere, were slightly over-shooting their carefully checked daylight register, and it was obvious that nothing fell to the south of the street. Thomas took charge of the digging, while Skene routed the men out of the cellars of the northern half of the 'keep.' But the street provided a new difficulty. It was enfiladed by several machine-guns, and the first stretcher party that attempted to use it was hit. To make matters worse, walking wounded were now coming up the communication trench from the front and support lines. The only possible crossing was close under the forward and rear barriers, or better still, for those who could wade by the water-meadows, to make the circuit of the village and rejoin the road further back. Anyhow, the street must be kept clear, and it was the sort of job Skene never felt able to depute to an N.C.O.

Dodging from house to house, taking what little cover he could get, he shepherded the steady stream of stretchers, coming and going, away from the *pavé* where the sparks flew and the ricochets whined like lost spirits.

Suddenly he found he was afraid. Alone, absolutely alone, on that roadway raised feet above the surrounding desolation, he dodged and stumbled, waving his arms and shouting in a hoarse croak :

'Get back, go by the barrier, or over the open!' but his thoughts were far other. He was not looking at the grotesque shapes of the splintered brickwork, or the muddy shell-pocked neglect of the meadows, visible as both were in the flickering star-shell light. He was looking at himself, belted in his filthy raincoat and waders, his revolver grinding his hip and the wet of his cap running down his face. He was five foot eleven by two and a bit broad. There were probably half a dozen machine-guns, firing on an average thirty rounds a minute, without jamming. A hundred and eighty bullets had to miss him every minute. But he must stay there, and keep people off that road, especially stretcher parties. That was what 'fighting' generally consisted in for infantry, he knew. He was

sick of it. His teeth chattered so that he thrust his raw fists into his pocket, found a pipe, chewed the mouthpiece to keep his jaw still, and went on cawing at each fresh batch of limping, staggering, half-bandaged figures that emerged from this or that swamped gully : ' Get back ! '

Why on earth should this scare him ? It was no worse surely than all that he had been doing these many months ? Was it the loneliness—perched up there on that fool of a road ? He had been in worse places. He thought of the time before the War when they were repairing the roof of the cathedral, and a plumber (who in his opinion had been kept waiting too long and was half frozen) had let the sling of some sheet-lead run, so that the whole mass was travelling toward the edge, when Skene and the foreman, overlooking the job, shoved a baulk of timber in the way and stopped what might have been a nasty accident. He remembered how he had kept the thing in position, his back against the parapet, until the foreman fetched help to secure the loose end. That was a more ticklish job surely ? Yes, but it had been his job, his pride and pleasure. This was not. His feet were turning aside in spite of him. His stomach quaked. A ricochet brushed his ear. In

another moment he would have jumped into the nearest drain, but a louder crash than usual held his attention. A five-nine had landed slap on the forward barrier and blown it away. A lump of stone caught him just above the ankle, hurting him horribly, but the spell was broken. He limped to the place, collared the nearest N.C.O., got a digging party, and started to rebuild the barrier. The men were more than a little shy of the job, but he stood his ground, shouting down to them :

' Look sharp, you can dig down there if I can stand here, can't you ? '

Incredibly slowly they shovelled, revetted and made good. The first cover he had was under the beginnings of the new barrier, just as the Boche artillery gave up searching, at about three-thirty. He had been playing Aunt Sally for three mortal hours.

Back with Thomas in the Headquarters cellar he let himself go a bit, over the casualty return.

' A nice experiment. Eight, fifteen, nineteen, twenty-seven of ours. Thirty-one walking and nearly fifty stretcher cases I saw from the other companies. Nolan had eight and eight, and they say A Company let him take a section—say fourteen—that 's

thirty men, and neither he nor any of them have come back. Even supposing he 's done in a hundred Boche, which is absurd, because they aren't so thick in the line as we are—we 're a good thirty men weaker in proportion in one single battalion than we were at stand-down.'

Mansfield had joined them :

' You don't seem to like these Horse Marines ! '

' Like. I should like to be—even ten yards nearer Lille, not to mention Berlin—at the price, but we aren't ! '

' Oh, well you know——' began the well-mannered, authority-backing Thomas.

But ever after, if he heard that phrase ' Horse Marines,' Skene felt a sense of nausea.

Somehow a ghoulish odour of death in a cellar, or from hideously tearing ricochets on an open road, clung to the jest.

X

THE DEVIL'S OWN

'THEY 'RE all b—— spies, the whole lot of 'em!'

So Croten, the ex-Ranker. But Skene expostulated.

'I think that 's a very extreme statement to make about people whose country we 've borrowed to fight in. Can you justify it?'

''Course I can! I say all natives are spies, and I 'll prove it!'

'Go ahead!'

They were seated in the Company Headquarters dug-out in the support line, their backs against the sweating walls, their feet in ammunition-boxes that squelched at the least movement. Wedged apart by a lacquer and brass card-table brought from the ruins of a neighbouring château, Thomas was writing home, Skene was going through lists of men and equipment, with a view to indents, and Croten was a visitor from A Company, that held the continuation of the trench, to the left, across the road. He was drinking whisky and water out of a tin mug and proceeded, while outside the

rat-tat-tat, swish, boom of the eternal battle went on.

'Well, look at the business with that ambulance, while I was marching the new draft up from Railhead. You know what the road is like—paving all slippery—row of trees each side—pitch dark, of course. I was in front, young Shanks at the rear. Hadn't gone more 'n half a mile, when there was a hell of a row behind. I halted the party, and was just going back to see to it, when I had to jump for my life. A mangy Ford ambulance just missed me, near as nothing, and tore off, up the road. I shouldn't ha' known what it was if there hadn't been a light in the bloomin' thing!'

'Oh, come!' remonstrated Skene, 'you don't tell me any one drove up the road with headlights on!'

'I never said anything of the sort. There weren't any headlights. It was the Red Cross on the tilt that looked as if it was made of glass—sort of glaring!'

'Queer thing!' commented Skene; 'by the way, do you know Murdon?'

He introduced the dark-eyed pale-faced boy who had just pushed his way under the ground-sheet that covered the entrance. Murdon sat down and was accommodated with a drink. Croten went on: 'I went

back and found young Shanks picking the rear file out of the ditch ! '

' They 'd been run over ? '

' That 's the funny part of it. They 'd been scorched ! ' Skene said nothing. Croten said nothing in order to be impressive. In the silence, young Murdon could be heard gulping his drink.

' Well,' Skene inquired, ' how does this fit in with the spy theory ? '

' Why, I think these natives have got hold of an ambulance, and light it up in some rum way—may be luminous paint—and drive it up the road to help the Boche spot us ! '

' That seems a bit far-fetched ! '

' Oh ! does it—then how do you account for the fact that they caught us with shrapnel twice before we got to the dump ? '

' It happens every other night ! '

' Does it. I think it 's dam' suspicious. Well, good-night all ! '

' Good-night ! '

The receding splashes echoed down the trench between bursts of gunfire, and the grumbling talk of men pursuing their evening duties, mustering for fatigues and working parties.

' I thought that was a rotten silly yarn ! ' Skene said to Thomas.

'What can you expect of that type of chap? I say, steady with that whisky, Murdon, it 's got to last another two days!'

As a matter of fact, Thomas underestimated. The battalion was not relieved in its regular turn, and it was nearly a week later that Skene, adjusting his equipment, and pulling down his chin-strap, splashed along the water-logged rat-hole in which they existed. He was going to the 'dump,' back there in the reserve line, where the rations would be flung out from the horse-transport limbers. Murdon ought to superintend the job, but in his own mind, Skene was never quite sure what Murdon might do, in certain circumstances. Jumping from hummock to hummock amid the myriad shell-holes that gleamed greenish as the fetid water reflected the light of star-shells, Skene found the place, where the road sunk below the ridge. The night was unusually quiet, sporadic machine-gunning, and occasional whizz-bangs, but no heavy stuff. Already he could hear, far back, the rattle of transport approaching, and nearer, the grumble and splashing of the fatigue parties coming from the different companies to fetch and carry. Under the shelter of a not-quite-demolished house,

he made out shadows congregated—stretcher-bearers waiting to transfer their burdens to the ambulances that would come later. Here was Murdon—doing his job in a businesslike way. Skene was pleased, the boy seemed to know what he was up to. Here were the sergeants, keeping their parties under cover. The rattle rearward materialised into mule-drawn limbers, stumbling and jolting up the broken road. Quickly they were emptied, turned about, and sent clattering off quicker than they had come. The water-cart was the last, but eventually the group about it thinned, dispersed. Skene was just going to recommend Murdon to take a turn round by the half-made communication trench, when the inevitable happened—the boom of a biggish gun so clear as to leave no doubt that it had been aimed directly at them was simultaneous with that tearing of the sky, and the ear-splitting smash, near by. The cry, so well known yet always of such disturbing urgency, 'Stretcher-bearer!' went up. There was a scuffle and dragging, sound of human voices in pain and exasperation, and slowly, one by one, the casualties were picked out of the mire and débris in which they had been flung, and were brought along. Two dead—four wounded,

one who would not keep quiet, kept crying out. The busy doctor from the first-aid post could not stop him with morphia. Skene wished the ambulance would hurry up, it was bad for the others to hear the chap. Then quite suddenly, and so noiselessly that it startled them, an ambulance stood vibrating and clicking beside them.

'Get that man away first!' but before the words were out of his mouth, the bearers were lifting the stretcher and shunting it into place on the rack. It was then that Skene heard a shout, almost a shriek from Murdon: 'Don't put him on there—don't——!'

The words were drowned in a terrific explosion. They were all flung yards apart. Neither Skene nor any other man ever knew, under such circumstances, how long it took the stunned faculties to recover perception. Gradually it dawned on him that he ought to put that fire out. What did the fellows let the ambulance burn for, a beacon to the Boche gunners. He dragged himself to his feet, not for the first time surprised that nothing was broken, so far as he could feel. He staggered forward, fell over a body, got up, and found himself enveloped in thick stifling

smoke and scorching heat. The flames had died now, only a glowing mass was slowly falling to pieces as the chassis dissolved. He ran into some one. It was Murdon, staring, staring. Skene shook him roughly by the arm. The boy seemed to come back as if from a journey of a thousand miles.

'Where 's the driver?'

'There was no driver!'

'Look here, pull yourself together, Murdon!'

'It came for him!'

Skene had a good look at the boy's face as the embers shone. He was asleep or dazed. It was not a state for an officer to be seen in before the men, and gradually, from the corners in which they had fallen, those who could move were pulling themselves upright, cursing and wiping dirt and blood from their eyes. Skene called to the nearest N.C.O. to clear the wreck out of the road, as he took Murdon by the arm and forced him away.

. . . . . .

The weary, dangerous weeks turned into months. The battalion went far afield. It was many a day before Skene found himself again in the sector where he had heard Croten's tale of the ambulance, and

seen Murdon's trance. Both Croten and Murdon had been killed. Inured to the routine, he amused himself on the dump, trying to puzzle out where the houses used to stand, where the road had been. The same old game was going on, here were the N.C.O.'s waiting with parties—there, somewhere back, were distantly audible the ration limbers, behind him was the rat-tat-tat, swish, boom. The only difference was that every one had a tin hat, and that the landscape was wearing up. What would it look like in ten years, he wondered? Among all these familiar things he saw a figure wandering a little uncertainly. He approached and asked if he could do anything. The face that was turned to him was the serious, utterly civilian face of mid-War. The badge was R.A.S.C.

'I 've come up to see about an ambulance that was hit and burned out!'

'You 're a bit late, aren't you? That was last autumn!'

'Some mistake. It was last week!'

'What?' Skene astonished himself by shouting.

'I 've got all the evidence for the Court of Inquiry!'

'Court of Inquiry?' echoed Skene.

'Well, you see, our people are accustomed to having the stuff knocked about, and captured even. But when a vehicle burns its own chassis, they think there 's something up!'

'I should say there was!' replied Skene.

'This is the third time. And each time we 've tried to identify the 'bus, and inform the Park it belonged to, and we 've never identified any of 'em!'

Skene had a sensation of something going round and round in his head. He was accustomed by the War to strangeness, topsy-turvydom, and cruel irony. But somehow he felt that this particular thing was different. Banishing fancy from his mind, he pondered a moment and suggested:

'Well, of course, I 'm one of those that are bandied about, and I soon lose track of things. But some of the drivers of ambulances must have been here more continuously than I. They might know something.'

He stood there waiting. The R.A.S.C.(M.T.) inquirer stood beside him. As the minutes wore on the remains of the evening hate dwindled down. The ration parties had come and gone. There

seemed to be very few wounded that night, and in the growing stillness there was presently born a new sound.

'Ambulances!' said his companion, 'perhaps I shall find out something now!'

'Perhaps!' Skene rejoined. 'They seem to be making enough noise to tell the Boche a good deal.'

There was certainly a devilish clatter on the road. Admitting the hard usage to which the ambulances were subjected, and the state of the surface of a traffic artery that had been shelled continuously for years, it sounded as though the entire army were on the move. The enemy, on the other hand, were curiously quiet. Skene and his companion were standing at the top of the dump, just below the barricade; before their feet were the horse-shoe ruts, where all wheeled traffic turned to go back. They both gasped with surprise, when one, and one ambulance only, bore in sight, in the star-shell flicker. It came quite alone, slowly, sonorously as an ironmonger's shop adrift, strangely visible and audible. They were more astonished at its steady pace. Suddenly Skene shoved his companion violently, and leapt aside. The thing, with a sudden

grinding spurt, had rushed right at them. Picking themselves up from the mire, they glared into each other's faces.

'Where did it go?' demanded the other.

'Over the barricade—or through—Hell, I don't know!'

'Sentry!'

No answer. They peered over the barricade. Nothing. They knew that before. There could be nothing there but shell-holes, old caved-in trenches, wire, and half-overgrown swamp, until you blundered into the isolated fire-bays of the front line. No ground for any vehicle. But was the whole place deserted? Skene shouted again. From a neighbouring dug-out appeared a helmeted figure.

'Corporal of the guard, sir!'

'Where 's your man on this barricade?'

''E was there a moment ago, sir!'

'He isn't now!'

Groping in the darkness and slush: ''Ere 'e is, sir, 'e 's done in!'

The sentry lay beside the fire-step. His chest was stove in. A big paving-stone lay beside.

'Well, of all the——' Skene stopped.

'I shall have to report this!' came the matter-of-fact voice at his side, 'but I

can't think what unit that 'bus can have belonged to ! '

' The Devil's Own,' suggested Skene.

' Do you think they 've driven right into the Boche lines ? There 'll have to be an arrest made.'

Skene nearly said : ' Arrest Beelzebub ! ' but refrained. He never heard again of the Demon Ambulance. He never liked to inquire, for fear of being laughed at.

XI

THE DARKEST DAY

'You know nothing about it!' At these words, the other nine occupants of the smoking compartment in the carriage of the special train that was taking a contingent of East Anglian enthusiasts, that November day, up to one of the greater London matches of the football season, looked round at the speaker in speechless astonishment. They had never heard Dormer speak so brusquely. He himself appeared no less astonished than they.

Older than most of them in years, older still in having been in the War when they had not, always irreproachably staid by profession, he was shy to timorousness of any expression of feeling. But the expectation that greeted his remark was so obvious, and the motive prompting it so strong, that he was obliged to go on and justify himself. Removing his pipe from his mouth, but holding it near his lips as if to show that he might replace it and cork himself up again, at any moment, he continued:

'You talk about the Armistice as if it

had been the end of the War. It wasn't, any more than posting the letters is the end of the day's work. It 's the result. So was the Armistice. It had been inevitable a long time. The end had already come.'

'You don't mean the Peace Treaty ?'

'I don't. That was not the end of the War. It was the beginning of the next. The end came on a day in April 1918.'

'Rot ! It wasn't within six months of that.'

'All right !' Dormer replied, replacing his pipe.

But some of his hearers were not satisfied, and very soon one of them asked, in an injured tone, as braving him to make good his assertion :

'Well, how do you make it out ?'

'I just tell you what I saw,' replied Dormer defensively. 'If you can draw a different conclusion, you 're welcome.' No one answered, and Dormer went on, with that sort of irritability of a man made to talk against his will.

'I say the end came in April 1918. I ought to know. I went out in 1915. I 'd seen most of the attempts of one side and the other to break down the trench-line opposite to them. D'you know why

they never succeeded? Simply because, in order to break through a trench system, you 've got to destroy the solid earth of which the trenches are composed. Both sides found out how to do it. There was nothing so very wonderful about the method. All that was wanted was just as much forethought and common sense as go to the running of an efficient business. Given machinery and organisation, you can do anything with the ground or buildings on it. You couldn't expect soldiers to see that, of course. They wanted to fight the old handicraft war, man to man, which is their proper business. But it didn't work, in that show.

'They used to take us out, and capture bits of trenches, it was always possible to do that. The difficulty was to keep them. Nice death-traps they were, most of them. You see, a captured trench is wrong way about. All the dug-outs, communications, heights and levels, drains and the rest, are backside round. Then, the chaps from whom you took a trench were bound to know more about it than you did, and could make it unhealthy. This dawned on the various General Staffs concerned, in the course of years, and they started getting in machinery to do the job efficiently, not

to take, but to abolish trenches. The machinery they got was too good. I 'm not joking. From the Somme onwards, you could hardly find the trench you were attacking. It was gone. So was the earth it was composed of. There was nothing to walk on. You stuck. So did the War.

'So one side and the other stuck, and stuck. Only there was something, not the ground, that you can't do just anything with. I mean human nature. When the Boche stuck, in April 1918, no one was surprised. But every one was disgusted. There was evidently no end to the business. Yet there was. And I saw it. The end came just then. If it hadn't, I don't know what might not have happened. They don't tell you, in the history books, about the mutinies there were. It took all the nations concerned in a different way—the Russians temperamentally, the Germans doggedly. They were always coming over, in ones and twos. The French felt they had rights. The British had a good row and had done with it. And so on. The fed-upness was so general that I doubt if there would have been much more fighting in the fifth winter.'

Dormer stopped for a moment, and sucked at his extinct pipe. But the silence constrained him to go on and finish.

'When we were all pushed back in March and April, I don't remember that we were frightened, particularly. The prospect of hand-to-hand fighting was no worse than sitting still and being shelled, which was what the War had consisted of, for most of us, for years. The enemy was individually less terrifying than his heavy artillery. But it did seem pretty hopeless when, ten miles nearer England and further from the Rhine, we settled down a bit, after a week or two of uncomfortable trekking, and the old game started all over again. We had just lost the billets, railways and general arrangements, which in the course of years we had got into a handy and serviceable state. Now we had to start afresh. It did seem endless. Imagine the population of London—we were nearly that—moving out to Watford and beginning to build a new town there. I don't know who were the most tired, we ourselves, the enemy, or our respective people at home.

'It was on one of those days that I saw the real end of the War. It was a spring day—an April day—the sort that people write poems about. The sky was as grey as it ever is in November, it had rained all night, and everything was soaking, and in the morning a nasty stingy wind got up.

That part of Flanders is in the same latitude as Southern England, but it looks northwards, open to the North Sea, and is, on the whole, less temperate than our side of the Channel. We should have been even more done than we were, if we had not been fighting and marching—running away as slowly as possible—all the time. Every day we dug in, and made some sort of a scheme of defence. Sometimes the Germans nearly caught us up and we exchanged a few shots. And then, nearly always, it was found that some one on our right or left had gone back further, and back we went, a few more miles. At last the news came filtering down from Divisional Headquarters to our Brigade, that the Germans were held at last, and that fresh troops were coming up behind, and we could pull out. It was time. We were down to half our strength, and most of the officers hadn't slept for a week. So we marched and marched, in that miserable April, through country which had been rest billets or training camps, and which was now to be given up to the same old mess that we had seen on the lines we had lost. Already the civilians were turning out, the children calling after us, "Eenglishe, no bon!"

'So we came to Ste. Blanque. You don't know it, of course. No one would ever go there, except in war-time. It was one of those small French towns that are all square, park, and station, with a couple of beet-sugar factories and several streets of little houses whose front doors open straight on to the pavement. But it meant a lot more than that to us. For years, it had been the place to which, with luck, one could get a lift, have a decent dinner, go to a show of sorts, touch civilisation in fact, and, for an evening, forget the ruddy War. Now, here it was, empty and deserted. The big church in the square had been hit, the station had been bombed. A few of the houses were shuttered and closed, but in the main, people had cleared off; many of the doors were standing open, fires still alight, even food left about.

'I had a job to stop looting. Not that I was particularly sentimental about the rights of civilians—you aren't, when you 've been through all that—but because I wasn't going to have my chaps caught by long-distance shell-fire in those streets. I kept 'em moving till we were in the park—Jardin Publique, the French call it, and there we had a stroke of luck. The big military hospital that had been there

for years had just been shifted, but had left its laundry boilers. We soon had them going and made coffee for our poor devils. They were lying where they had dropped without bothering to take off their equipment, most of them. Then one chap found a notice : " Ne pas marcher sur le gazon," which is French for " Keep off the grass." He said it meant " You needn't march with gas masks on," and they unslung those horrible contrivances. Then the coffee came along and they perked up. Wonderful, when you think they had been losing a battle steadily for a week or more. As soon as I heard the mouth-organs going, and saw the cigarette smoke rising in clouds, I knew they were all right, and went off for a quiet pipe myself. I always tried to look after my chaps, but I was dog-tired.

' I didn't get much peace, though. The guard on the gate sent a message: Would I look at the troops coming from the station ? I thought the corporal had gone mad, or jumpy with sleeplessness and shelling, but when I got to him, I couldn't blame him. Up that little cobbled French street a battalion of infantry was marching. I could not make them out. The colour of the uniform was khaki, but even at that

distance there was something unfamiliar about small details, hats, badges, equipment. They came on, in very good order, but the nearer they came, the stranger they seemed. The way they moved and held themselves was not like our people's, it was freer and the lift of the feet was different. Then I saw one thing. They were bigger, man for man, than we were. Yet they couldn't be Canadians or Anzacs. Those corps were nowhere near us. Finally, a mounted officer rode across to me and asked for the Lille road. It was a question in plain English, with ever so little accent, nothing like the stuff you see in comic papers. It was old-fashioned rather. He saw me looking at his badges, and told me who they were: U.S. Infantry. It was the Americans at last. I looked hard at them so as to know them again. I needn't have bothered. At the end of ten minutes, they were still passing, battalion after battalion. And such battalions! We had long been reduced to three companies, and the offensive had knocked them down to about half strength. The American formations seemed enormous. Mind you, there was nothing there but infantry, at the moment, with medicals and services. The artillery hadn't come

up and the cavalry I never saw ! It didn't matter. The infantry were enough for me to look at. They kept on passing, passing, young, seemingly all one age, big, very fit. Whether it was because of an empty stomach, or being fed-up, or simply that the War was getting the better of me, they seemed to me much more important than the offensive or leave, or any of the things we used to think about then. They were so new, so fresh, only just beginning when we were all wanting to leave off. That morning had dawned the darkest day I had ever seen in all these years. And it was the last day of the War, as I had known it. Clearly enough, the mere numbers of this new army now taking the field would be decisive. They might take time, they might make mistakes, but as we had found out by then, mistakes didn't lose a battle any more than the most brilliant skill could win one. What counted was numbers and machinery. They had those. They had other qualities that might have shown up well if they had had a chance. But the essentials were sufficient. I grasped that soon enough as I saw that enormous division of theirs crossing the little old square of Ste. Blanque. The place seemed smaller than I had thought it,

for I had never seen so many people in it, not even on a market day. I just stood beside my sentry and stared. Half an hour passed, but they were still going by. And then I found that I was not alone. My chaps, with a mug of coffee and a little rest, had come to themselves, and some of them had wandered as far as the railings of the Jardin Publique to see, I suppose, if there was a chance of loot. When they saw what was going on, they told the others, and soon half our scarecrow battalion was staring through the railings not far from me. It took them some bit to grasp what was up. Then some of the more excitable began to cheer.'

Dormer took a good look round the compartment as he made this daring statement, and defended himself :

'Yes, I know our lot weren't much given to that sort of thing, but you must remember that they were worn out and pretty depressed. And anything that had originally made the War worth fighting had long been buried by the endless routine and immense organisation. Any sort of glory, even the common decent feeling of doing one's duty, had been swallowed up in mere fatigue of keeping the thing going. It didn't matter if you looked at people's

faces or the actual ground you stood upon, both were equally worn up. It was, by then, no better at home than in France, the Balkans, Palestine or Mespot. Rationing and anxiety had turned everything sour. You can't wonder then, that when my poor old lot saw this fine new army taking the War out of their hands, they were pleased. And there was something more than their numbers, efficiency, freshness. When, after an hour, they halted for a few moments, or when one of their officers asked me for a direction, or what the billets were like, they spoke English. I know what you are going to say. There were strange words, and different meanings in their speech, the accent was not ours. But in the main, it was the same language and outlook. We had had Allies, all those years, French and Italians and Russians and Portuguese, whose talk we couldn't understand and whose ways were beyond us. These fellows had been brought up, as we had been, on the Bible. They were there, in that country, as we were, because something had been done that they would not suffer to go unchallenged. Only that would ever have got the British or the American Army into the field.

'Well, they came on and on, passing us,

as we waited for orders from Brigade. The effect on me, I don't mind telling you, was to send me to sleep. Awfully unmilitary, I know. So was most of the War. I had never felt so secure, nor so certain of the end, from the day in 1915, when I landed at Boulogne, to that day in 1918 when I first saw the Yanks. It was the darkest day I ever saw, and it was the last of the War, as I had known it.'

The train slowed up, and the occupants of the compartment stirred, finding hats and coats. The effect upon Dormer was as if he had been discovered asleep and dreaming, in some public place, and had been aroused by strangers. He said, apologetically:

'Well, I don't know when I made such a long speech as that!' and got up, like the others.

XII

'YOUNG HAMILTON TIGHE'

As they rode abreast—one on each of the strips of dirt that bordered the *pavé* road—it was perhaps an advantage that the heads upon their shoulders had no glass goggles in the temples like those of gas respirators, to allow of their thoughts about each being read by the other. Dormer, war-scarred, and good-humouredly pessimistic, was thinking: 'He 's a nice young chap. What does he want to get mixed up in this awful show for? I wouldn't if I were he, 'specially as it 's nearly over. It will be rotten luck if he gets pipped on the last day!'

His companion, Davis Tighe Hamilton, was thinking: 'Oh, Hell, get a move on! This is deader than mud. I don't wonder it 's been going on four years. And now they 'll all quit before I can show 'em how!'

Apart from their divergent thoughts, the two officers were very much alike. Or perhaps it was that the desultory stream of people they kept meeting, leaving behind and meeting again, were not interested in them. These groups and stragglers were

the backwash of the battle, walking wounded, tired and decimated units or parties, asleep on their feet or wheels, as they trekked back to billets, having been relieved in the line. Here and there was a shell-hole, a burying party, a broken-down vehicle, or a knot of exhausted men with stretchers, just doggedly waiting. No one looked very interested in the two officers obviously going up to take over some sector. It was part of the routine.

Yet there was a difference between the two. Dormer was like his horse, like the people on the road, like the landscape with its riven trees, and abandoned, shell-marked, half-flooded fields. Over him, as over all about him, had passed the War. He had no thought left but to get to the end of the day, eat and sleep and get up and go on the next day. Hamilton was different. Not merely in his close, stocklike collar, with its bronze rifles, not merely in the keen sallow features, brown bird-like eyes, lean fitness of the limbs. All these might have belonged to an Englishman resident some years abroad. It was that acquisitive eagerness of the face that marked him out from all who surrounded him. His eye brightened, his knee closed on the weary old screw whose pace he could not quicken,

as the rumble ahead, somewhere hidden in that grey horizon, rose a moment, only to sink again, or a long file of ambulances met his gaze, trundling carefully toward, and then past, and then away behind him. All that he felt, all that was new in him, and that he brought to this weary situation into which Europe had allowed itself to sink, culminated in the way he came to attention, as, dismounting in a miserable little deserted, tile-and-glass littered suburban street, they gave their horses to an orderly before a small villa labelled BRIGADE, and Dormer introduced him to a group of officers in the little parlour. 'Mr. Hamilton, U.S. Infantry, attached for instruction.' They were courteous, but they were not doing anything in particular, except discuss the likelihood of an Armistice. That annoyed him. He hadn't come all that way to be fooled. They had been playing with the War long enough. Maybe he could instruct them better than they him.

The Brigadier-boy didn't seem to think so—was distantly polite—treated him as though he were an unexpected, but—*noblesse oblige*—welcome guest at some garden party. There was a good deal of talk about the prospect of early peace.

They all seemed very pleased. What in Hell they thought they 'd come there for, Hamilton couldn't figure out. Dismissed with brief laconic orders to make themselves comfortable in a small antiquated factory, he went there with Dormer. Here was yet more routine — rations, and mail, setting of guards. Would he never get through all this, and find himself in the battle—the subdued pulsating rumble—always just beyond him? It had been out of his reach these four years. Now they were going to quit before he could get there. Were they? They didn't know Davis Tighe Hamilton.

Presently the battalion straggled in. You never saw men look less like fighting. There was no official news of any Armistice, but something had leaked out amongst all those blank-faced 'other ranks.' A sort of conspiracy was going on to slow-up the War and bring it to an end, he could sense it, though he could lay hold of nothing tangible to which Dormer's attention could be called. So he helped in the checking of equipment, the serving out of coffee, and waited, with the other officers, in the little time-keeper's room in the narrow street. Here there appeared a noisy young man whom Dormer introduced as Signals. His

name was Kavanagh. Irish. They waited. That seemed the main thing in this War. You waited. The very sporadic machine-gun fire outside waited too. The War waited. It irritated Hamilton beyond measure.

'When are we goin' to take over this line?' he asked Dormer.

'Waiting for Brigade orders!'

There was Dormer, waiting. Hamilton had learned that this officer was a teller in a bank. No go in him. Always waiting for orders. But his thoughts were interrupted by the signaller.

'I shouldn't hurry, young Hamilton Tighe!'

'Eh?'

'There 's plenty of time to enjoy the War!'

'I don't get you!'

'You know what happened to the other Hamilton Tighe?'

'My name is Davis Tighe Hamilton!'

'Same thing, the other way round!'

'Same as what?'

'Young Hamilton Tighe in the Ingoldsby Legends.'

'Never heard of him!'

'Never heard—why, even Dormer knows that yarn!'

Dormer dumbly indicated that, although no reader, he did.

'Wherever was you brought up—raised, you call it?'

'Champion, Illinois!' returned Hamilton tartly.

'And never read the Ingoldsby Legends. Well, well!'

'What 's it all about, anyway?'

'It 's about a young man called Hamilton Tighe, just like you. He was heir to great belongings, just like you. He was eager to be in the forefront of the fray, just like you. He hadn't had four years of it, like most of us——'

'You bet he hadn't, or he 'd be here still at the rate you 're going——' But Kavanagh didn't notice.

'What is it—oh, I know:

'Blood will flow and bullets will fly—
"Oh where will be then young Hamilton Tighe?"
On the foeman's deck, where a man should be,
With a sword in his hand and his foe at his knee,
Coxswain or boatswain or reefer may try,
But the first man on board will be Hamilton Tighe—

'—Just like you!'

'Oh, cut it out!'

'Not a bit of it. Just listen. Hamilton Tighe is you. The foeman's deck is the

Lille road. You 'll be the first there, if you 're not careful ! '

' Ah——'

' Look here——' broke in Dormer, ' I 've just enough left in my flask for one each. Come on ! '

As they shared the last of the whisky, Kavanagh went on.

' Observe the moral, Hamilton Tighe. Your great namesake was not liked by his commander. The gunnery was no better than it should be. His own side knocked off his head, at the range of ten yards, with an iron ball the size of an orange, while he was leading the bombers—I mean boarders. I say, war never alters, does it ? I should look out, if I were you, Hamilton ! '

But no one was paying any attention. Hamilton was looking at Dormer, who was reading a pink message form. Outside was the docile sulky murmur of men mustered to go up to the trenches of what might be their fourth winter. At Dormer's word they filed out into the street. After the light of the candle, in the shuttered room, the autumn night was pitch dark, with a sprinkling of rain. The company was split up into small parties, that made their way in file along the littered and deserted suburban street. But Hamilton did not

mind that. At last, at long last, he was going towards the thing on which he had expended some thought, and a good deal of fruitless desire. There, just beyond what appeared to be a ruined and trampled garden, was the feebly flickering and detonating battle.

It was not what he had supposed. There was something obscure, muddled, dirty, insignificant about it all, nothing big, striking, stimulating! It was like a third-rate machine, working badly in an ill-fitted factory. It did not touch anywhere his own previous experiences in the riskier—that meant to him, the more attractive—sports. He had hunted and fished, ridden horses and sailed boats, better and further than most people. The fighting of a real war was about the one thing he had not done. He meant to do it. Old enough to remember the news of Cuba and Manila, he could not connect those bright adventures with the monotonous training and endless involved circumlocution of this other war. Now they were going in single file, behind a guide. They came up to the reserve line of the battalion they were to relieve. Nothing military, soldierly about it. Groups of huddled figures crouched under groundsheets in the wet, nursing Lewis guns and

rifles. A hitch somewhere! Something was stopping them! Casualties. He saw the casualties without emotion. He had seen men knocked out before ever he came to France. It wasn't that. There was an enemy machine-gun, there in front, enfilading them, holding up the relief. Old Dormer was so careful about his men, trying to keep them under cover. No way to win a war, that! What was it? Trying to get in touch with the artillery.

'Take charge here a minute while I get on to Brigade.' That was Dormer all over, fussing about orders, support, artillery preparation. Next moment, by the light of a brighter flash, he found beside him a youngish sergeant whom he had noted as being more his sort, younger, brisker, more inclined to go on and get the job done. Hamilton shook the rain from the brim of his shrapnel helmet. Get on, oh! get on! Something boiled over in him. Dormer had gone with the signaller. Hamilton peered in the wavering gloom at the non-com.

'Sergeant, we'll put that machine-gun out, while they are waking up Artillery Headquarters!'

'Yessir.' The sergeant seemed willing enough, he just wanted telling what to do, like all Englishmen.

'Four men will be sufficient. Come forward!'

No one stopped them. Probably in the flash-chequered darkness, rain, and stumbling confusion of the relief, no one saw them. The trench was shallow, the hasty improvisation of that day's advance, never revetted in the hope that it would be rendered useless by further advance next day. Beyond it was some temporary wiring. Beyond that—nothing. Broken fences and trodden gardens, dark incomprehensibility! It was like nothing for which his long training had equipped him. That did not stop him. He had hunted half-way across a continent bigger than Europe. But in a few yards he found that he had now engaged on something more difficult. This was no wild, where one went forward with trapper or guide to seek a quarry that at best could fly or run away. This was civilisation gone smash, and somewhere in the tangle of it, a fellow with a machine-gun that kept squirting that leaden shower that whispered overhead, whined and flew as it struck anything, and came, he judged by the fall of the bullets, from at least a thousand yards. Defiantly he sprang forward, tripped and fell into an unseen hole half full of water.

When he scrambled out his sergeant touched his arm.

'We 're getting rather forward, sir. We shall run into our own shelling when they get the range!'

He waited. Vague murmur around, squashed-out detonations he could not locate, and the clatter of the men blundering after him. They all stood still, waiting. Rat-tat-tat went the gun in front, further off than ever. This was what they called war!

'Where do you make it to be, sergeant!'

'I don't rightly know, sir!'

Hanging back, this fellow too, hanging back and sir-ing. What was the use of that. It didn't conquer Cuba. Rat-tat. There it was again. He almost fancied he could identify the flash, there ahead. He shrugged his shoulders, shrugged his mind, and flung at his party: 'I 'm going to put that fellow out. Stay here if you don't like it!'

He plunged toward the vague light, the confusing sound. He was bigger, stronger, younger, more eager than those English soldiers. And now he was filled with a great exhilaration. He was free of all the petty restriction and office work of camp life. He was really fighting. He gripped

a Mills grenade in one hand, loosened his pistol with the other, leapt and strode as the ground permitted, never looked back for the others. As if he had animated the slackening battle foundering in the wet and darkness, as if he had given an example to all those half-hearted, sore-footed conscripts, the horizon behind him flared, a noise went right through his head as though the sky had been flung clanging on the earth, there was a great whirr, above him, and ahead, six patches of red-yellow, yellow-green, leapt and fell, with a quick deafening scatter of explosions that tripped over each other. He gave a shout. He was galloping, swimming through the battle. There surged up in him the restlessness, the energy, the wide activity of a young people in a great land. A rare music battered his ears, better than any concert could make, a vision of a golden avalanche of glory seemed to fall right on him and sweep him along, then steeply down with one immense vibration, into darkness.

In a grey drizzling morning, Dormer and Kavanagh stood side by side, in the ruined market garden. Stretchers were about, but men moved already with an ease, and obeyed only slackly. They were all waiting now.

There was no noise ahead, no battle anywhere. Nothing but misty, upheaved and silent plots of abandoned tillage. The sergeant was reporting.

'Fourteen gone walking, sir, four stretchers. There 's some I can't identify. I 've put 'em in sacks.'

'Deceaseds' effects ?' queried Dormer.

The sergeant showed some pathetic dirty little bundles. Dormer picked up one, and motioned to Kavanagh. There was no mistaking the badges, the pattern of the pistol, the look of bits of clothing, a knife, a wallet, a metal cigarette-case.

'The 'ead was missing——' the sergeant began.

Dormer motioned him to stop, but Kavanagh cried: 'By God, it 's young Hamilton Tighe !' and Dormer assented.

'Those are his things right enough !'

'Poor devil ! Wish I hadn't ragged him about it.'

'Oh Lord,' wearily, 'I shall have to write to his people. Where did he say he lived ? Illinois ?'

'Illinois is a state. Champion was his town.'

'Doesn't matter. U.S. Headquarters will pass it on. He was a nice young chap ! Pity !'

'Dormer, do you ever feel anything?'

'Not these three years or so. Forgotten how!'

'Don't you feel him sitting there, as it says in the book, without his head?'

'There 's so many casualties. Can't be helped!'

A soldier approached with only his rifle slung. No equipment. Before Dormer could check him, he handed a pink message slip. Dormer glanced at it and turned to the sergeant.

'They 've signed the Armistice. Cease fire and stand down.'

XIII

THE CHINK

At the entrance to a dug-out, on which was fixed a wooden board, marked in black letters on a white ground with the words 'Area Commandant,' Lieutenant Skene got down from the Signal Corps bicycle on which he had cranked his weary way round the area, and shouted to his servant that he was back.

Having pushed his way under the waterproof sheet that covered the aperture, he stood a moment in the twilight of the cellar he inhabited with the dignitary described by the signboard, adjusting his eyes to the semi-darkness of the place. He was met by the spectacled gaze of the Canadian captain who was his Commanding Officer, and who was seated just where Skene had left him, four hours earlier, wedged between the table that filled the entire floor space, and the wall that formed the back to the salvaged garden seat that stood against it. The old Colonial didn't appear to have moved. The same taciturn humour gleamed in his eye, and lurked in his walrus moustache, the same fatalistic ease lay in every line of

his figure. There might be a few more army forms on the table, the tobacco in the bent-stem pipe might have been replenished, the whisky in the tin mug almost certainly had. Skene hung up his dented and sweaty tin helmet, wet accoutrements and soiled trench-coat, eased his field boots at the straps, and slid on to the seat. The servant brought his tin plate of Irish stew, put a loaf of bread on the table. The only sign that Captain Dakers made was to fill and pass a pannikin of drink to his subordinate. It was his well-understood intimation that he was ready to hear the morning's report, while they ate.

'Nothin',' mumbled Skene.

'War still on?' queried Captain Dakers, known to the army as 'Uncle.'

'You 've had a *communiqué* from Army Headquarters, I suppose?'

'Yep!'

'Nothin' there!'

'Wind still up!'

'Tell us news,' growled Skene, cutting bread.

'All is quiet on the Western Front, but the situation is not without danger.'

'Anybody doin' anything, anywhere?'

'Russians going home, Yanks coming out!'

'By Gad!' Skene laid down his knife and fork. 'There is something new. I 've seen our latest Allies!'

Captain Dakers replenished his mug, and asked:

'Nicaragua?'

'Guess again!'

'Eskimo?'

'Further off!'

'Cut it out!'

'Chinks.'

Uncle drank. 'Gee!' was his simple comment.

'I couldn't make it out!' Skene went on. 'I was at the top of the hill above Peenebeke, when I saw a crowd coming up the main road. A crowd, not a formation. All anyhow, dressed in brown and blue, and carryin' a lot of stuff. They barged into old Van Keyser's big pasture. I knew what a row there would be, so I went down to see who they were. I found a lot of fine, big chaps, gibbering and jabbering like a kids' school. Couldn't understand a word, but the set of their faces gave me the idea. Curious, they looked all as alike as a flock of sheep to me. Suppose we look the same to them!'

These abstractions were beyond Uncle. He merely commented: 'Labour, of course?'

'Yes. I hadn't been looking at them very long when there came up a sort of missionary, with two pips, and one of those Light Railway merchants from Army Headquarters. Seems they 're going to run a narrow gauge line here right across from Railhead to us! The railway chap had a whole lot of big-scale drawings, and set out the ground, then the missionary preached a sermon in Chink—and you should have heard 'em!'

'Chin-waggin'?'

'Not only chins. Both hands. I asked the missionary if they were disputing his orders. He said, no, it wasn't that. They were dividing up the job into pieces. Seems that they don't understand working to order, or to time. They must have a job, and do it.'

'Bon idea. I wish some of our lot could lay hold of that!'

'There 's only one thing that strikes me, Uncle. Any railway here, even a narrow gauge, will excite Jerry. He 'll be shelling it!'

'That 's what we 're here for!'

'That 's what we 're here to avoid!'

'Did you see these new holes, by the bridge? He must have got that taped.'

'I know. I told the camouflage people to cover 'em over. He mustn't know how clever he is!'

'Quite right!'

'But by the time the Celestial Army works down to the river bank, I expect we shall hear more of it!'

'Won't disturb my sleep!' and suiting the action to the words, Captain Dakers knocked out his pipe, drained his mug, put up his feet and composed himself for a nap. With some men, in the earlier years of the War, Skene would have been angry. Now, he knew that this was the better part of soldiering.

Skene was too busy, Uncle too philosophic, to meet half-way the ever-accumulating troubles of that autumn. The official notification of the presence of Chinese Labour Corps units in the area, came, as usual, a few days after the necessary arrangements had been made for their billeting. Their rations and discipline did not concern the area. They produced upon the minds of Uncle and his assistant no more effect than any other of the innumerable and decreasingly military contingents that were being found necessary to cope with the colossal daily wastage and effort of the War. True,

the new nationality imported into the already extraordinary mixture that had more than repopulated the conscription-depleted communes of the war zone, was curiously in evidence in the streets of Railhead towns, and on the roads of the area. Before little shops, that had blossomed into emporiums of all that the soldier could need, there were now to be seen, not merely the brisk, khaki-clad Briton, or the azure poilu, keen on bargains, but also heavy, slow-moving men, in dark brown or blue, with flat, hatless faces, queer shoes, hands that hung inert by their sides, and curious slanting eyes that would gaze, often for half an hour at a time, upon the unfamiliar objects exposed for sale. Or on the granite-paved, tree-lined road would appear groups of such men, going upon Heaven knows what errand, with their flat-footed walk, voices nearer to the sounds made by animals than to any European tongue, and sometimes rising in strange discordant singing.

Yet, for all its apparent stalemate, the War was moving. Not with the bright, immediate heroism, the stimulating challenge, the purging shock with which it had opened. It dragged now, with dark inevitability, from one sinister development to another. One of these

provided Skene with his next vision of those whom he called 'our latest Allies.' It was a still, ripe autumn day, of the sort that Flanders shares with England, mild and misty so that the Front was momentarily quiet, visibility being too poor for long range or air fighting, when for a few hours the mechanical destruction seemed to halt, the deadly watchfulness to relax. Skene was not happy on such mornings. The middle-class civilian in him was outraged by being reminded of that peace which seemed so far removed and so impossible of recovery ; his aesthetic sense reasserted its craving for something better to look at than rusted tin and broken wire, blasted trees and incinerators. And just as the dead grey mist began to break, about eleven o'clock, he was granted one of those few moments of respite that did visit him, in the length of days, as if some power were unwilling that men should die spiritually as well as physically. He had been out and far afield, since early morning, doing the hundred and one small jobs that made the area more onerous to run than any unit, knowing that by midday the weather would be clear and movement dangerous. Just where the undulating plateau dropped to the level of the river, he stopped for a

moment to rest and enjoy himself. He had biscuit and chocolate and a flask of red wine in his pockets, and he sat on the brink of the ditch, gazing at a row of golden-sequined poplars that glittered upon the straight line of a small canal, that had just caught in vivid reflection the first blue patch of the sky. At the end of the row was a little old brick chapel, with a tiny cupola belfry. Beyond were two colour-washed cottages, red-roofed and sheltered by tall elms, nearly bare. It reminded him of some minor Dutch or Flemish picture, the shapes solid but well proportioned, the colours not brilliant but in perfect harmony, the whole a worthy expression of life, quiet, but not mean or shallow, in a corner of the earth that had a gentle and lasting comeliness, rather than any sudden or arresting beauty.

While he gazed, he was conscious enough of a defect, a discord that slowly revealed itself as a straight scar of upturned earth, with hard-looking rails and mechanical details. From beyond the belfry there emerged figures, not the half-Dutch shapes moving with native certainty that belonged to the picture, but hurried and swarming, odd in outline, unfamiliar in gesture ; and from them rose an outlandish chanting,

as of some strange sea-fowl congregating together. They used levers, and kept so exactly together that they had the appearance, not of individuals, but of a great centipede turning over. It was the Chinese Labour Corps, laying the narrow gauge line. He got up, his moment's respite ended, violently recalled to reality. He had no quarrel with railways and Chinks—together they made a bad job a little less gruelling. But they spoiled the picture. They didn't fit, they belonged to the willow-pattern country of the green dragon in the bamboo swamp. He had been looking for a brown cow or a white horse to give colour to that Netherlands meadow. They were ominous, too. What was to happen in a quarrel that he and his had begun, but that was gradually embroiling the ends of the earth ?

The next moment Skene leapt for the ditch. His ear, trained by years of listening, had caught the sharp clang of a big gun, miles away, pointed directly at him. He had a full minute to wonder, and then the hurtling destruction sped past him, and flew at the new work and crowded groups below. . . . Whang, whee ! the sound rose and bellied out in unison with the clouds of earth and débris, while the

noisome, gassy smoke hung across the yawning crater.

How would the Celestial Army take that? Skene stared hard as the smoke cleared. At first he could see nothing. Then he caught sight of some of them. They had scattered all over the meadow; what were they doing? It took him some minutes to discover. They had kneeled, foreheads to earth, towards, not away from, the spot where the shell had struck. That was queer. They weren't running or shouting or behaving like any of the various coloured contingents that he had seen under fire. They kept still.

Whump! far away. Here comes the second, thought Skene, used for years to the procedure. Ah . . . a . . . ah, screamed the shell, crash into the poplars and down into the canal beyond. The displaced earth and water whirled up and fell cascading. Skene watched. The Chinese shifted round, on their knees. Then he understood. They weren't afraid. They were worshipping. A strange dragon had swooped from the sky. They behaved discreetly toward so honourable a dragon.

Not so the Germans and the British and the French. To them it was but an incident in their war. The incident re-

duplicated itself tediously in all the consequences. The railway people telephoned to Army Headquarters. Army Headquarters told the C.R.A. Soon the heavies across the river were after the German 'planes and balloons that had 'spotted' the new railway. Then German heavies searched for the Allied heavies. Skene made his way gingerly and by detours, to the dug-out, to see that stretcher-bearers were standing to, and roads cleared as they were blocked. By mid-afternoon the whole area was rocking and reverberating with the gunners' battle. Skene forgot the Chinese.

He was reminded in the morning when, short of sleep and blinking with gas, he set out to see what damage had been done to defences and traffic arteries. His corporal was waiting at the entrance to the dug-out.

'Civilian other side the river, sir!'

Cheek! The area was evacuated. And what civilian would be such a fool as to come south of Peenebeke, after yesterday's strafe? Wiping his eyes, however, Skene was able to see that it was no such thing. There on the bank of the river, stood, immobile and expressionless, a Chinaman. He neither showed any consciousness of

Skene's appearance and shouts, nor made any appeal. He stared, southwards, in the direction from which the dragon had come.

'All right!' Skene dismissed the corporal. 'I'll see to him!' But by the time he had crossed the bridge, and come up the northern towpath, the Ally had disappeared.

Two days later, on his returning from the morning round, Uncle pushed across to Skene a pink message form. It was from the Railway Authority, billeted in a château, at the rear limit of the area.

'Remove Chinese,' it ran.

'You see what you've got to do?' queried Uncle laconically.

'I don't,' returned Skene, 'but I suppose I'd better go and look.'

'I suppose you had. Ack, ack, ack!' and Uncle poured himself out another drink.

It was nearly dark before Skene left the St. Omer road for the château in question. It was one of those curious accretions of the War, a grandiose villa, now inhabited by a set of railway engineers with blue tabs, and khaki-clad clerks. There was no need for the 'adjutant' to explain why Skene

had been sent for. There, in the little tessellated hall, two Chinese labourers squatted on their hams, unblinking, staring, immovable. They showed no sign at his entrance.

'Been there twenty-four hours, pretty near!' the adjutant informed him; 'can't get a word or sign out of 'em. Shift 'em, will you?'

Skene was used to everything and anything. In spite of years of battered disillusionment, he clung to the notion of the early days, naïvely, to get on with the job. He said, 'Go home!' in pidgin-English, pidgin-French, in dumb show. Before him, the grey eyeballs beneath the upslanted eyebrows shifted mechanically, the slitlike lips on the flat, dough-coloured faces remained ever so slightly parted. Movement or sign of comprehension there was none.

'It's no use!' Skene was forced to admit. 'You'll have to send for their officer.'

While telephones were ringing, and an argument was carried on with signals in the adjoining salon, he sat before these two figures, wondering. What went on, what had passed, behind those faces of wood, in those blocky heads, set so stiffly upon

round, substantial shoulders? He pondered long and without result, and was relieved to see a bearded man, in a long raincoat, being conducted towards him.

'I lost them in the bombardment,' was the explanation.

'What, a week ago? Aren't they hungry?'

'They can manage.'

Skene rose. But he was still curious.

'What made them come here?'

'They were marched this way. They always know where they 've been.'

Then, with curious noises that evidently conveyed some sort of order, the 'missionary' went, and with him, suddenly galvanised, shuffled those images.

'Awfully obliged!' said the Railway Official at Skene's elbow. 'Come into the mess and have a drink!'

Skene forgot them. He saw them once again, at a railway crossing, as his train, his last military train, was carrying him—home? To demobilisation, anyhow.

And they who had come so far, from the fabulous East, would also go home, carrying with them—what?

XIV

FAREWELL, MY COMRADES!

OR THE END OF THE REGIMENT, BEING A REFLECTION UPON THE LAST STEP IN MILITARY EVOLUTION

THE Peace talk to which we are now being habituated may, or may not, end merely in talk. But one fact does emerge, clear enough to the average civilian intelligence. No war is ever like the one before it. No war is ever like that for which we prepare. But the next war for our generation is everywhere envisaged as being swift and dreadful, and fought by tiny, highly destructive units—not against other units—but against the civilian population by means of the activities of which alone such units can be supplied and reinforced. So much so, that it is doubtful if the word 'civilian' can any longer be used to distinguish the conscripted mass of clerks and factory and transport workers which we may, at any moment, be forced to become, from the 'military,' the few individuals in aeroplanes, submarines or tanks, who will do the fighting. Few of the millions mobilised

in 1914-1918 ever saw their adversaries face to face, fewer still engaged in any hand-to-hand fighting. Next time the number will be infinitesimal. The progress of military invention recurs again and again to its one true vision, shock tactics inducing by surprise to immediate decision. The prolonged battering of one individual by another, until the weaker or less lucky gives, was always old-fashioned. Hence the aid of the gods, so constantly invoked to bring strife to victorious conclusion. For conclusion it must have. Strife cannot continue. There is no such thing as a state of war, there are only moments of bellicose superactivity. The best soldiers always asked for quick, cheap victory. Of what use, of what fame, are the exhausting dragged-out struggles of the Siege of Troy, the Peloponnese, the Crusades, the Imperial Wars, or our own, 1914-1918? No one wins. Both sides lose. The briefer the campaign, the better. Marathon, Toulouse, Orleans, the Armada, Waterloo, Sedan, Cuba—campaigns of a few months—are the only ones that ever decided anything. Hence the obsession of the military mind with shock tactics. Hit first, hit hard, hit so that your adversary cannot hit back because you have destroyed his strength

(nowadays his supplies) was always the one text of the conqueror, however buried in verbiage, or cloaked by technicality. Thus the tribal or national wars, in which whole peoples were armed and thrown into the mêlée, have been superseded by improved shock tactics. The latest refinements of these, the aeroplane, tank or submarine, are but the quintessence of the armoured knight going faster and further, and becoming more deadly, the final stage of the chariot (the French actually call their tanks *chars d'assaut*) and the modern edition of the ram. The development of infantry fighting, against this strong perpetual tendency, has been one of the redeeming features of the cult of Mars. In the infantry alone occurs that comradeship, that family feeling that belongs to the company or battalion, or equally to the ship's crew.

It is a sad thought, therefore, that this time the infantry battle has been definitely doomed by the advance of science. The infantry has survived so much. It emerged from annihilation by the chariot and the elephant. It stood firm against the wild horsemen of Pannonian Gaul. It learned laboriously how to shoot down before he could bring his weight to bear upon it,

the heavy horsed knight of the Middle Ages. It reached its best by the aid of firearms, when the English line was the envy of Europe. The standards of our county regiments proclaim its history. The corporal's pike perfected its discipline. The genius of Wellington rendered it, by forming square, the one unanswerable checkmate to Napoleon's favourite master-stroke, the converging of artillery fire and the launching of massed cavalry upon a chosen spot in his adversary's dispositions. Yet it proved just as effective in the Soudan, eighty years later. Its function was primarily defensive. Its business was to get to a certain place, whether there was a wall to hold or a redoubt to capture, and to stay there. It could, in its best, its bayonet days, carry its own supplies on its aching back. It was less likely to be split up into small specialised parties, like other arms. It tended to be recruited from some special district or under one known leader. Sea fighting was but its marine counterpart, the boarders a storming party, who, once successful, might become a prize crew, otherwise garrison. Cavalry and artillery were always more spectacular, never so homogeneous. With what confidence did one learn, in 1914, that the Hertfordshire Fusiliers, the Rutland

Light Infantry had gone overseas. They, one felt, would not fail, having the names of Blenheim and Salamanca on their standards. They did not. But they became transmogrified. When, eventually, one found oneself lying next them, they had been split up into companies that only occasionally saw each other, had been armed with strange engines. The fatherly colonel no longer waved his sword in front of his 'boys.' The heroic drummer no longer showed them how to die. The comic quartermaster ceased to enliven the bivouac. The veteran sergeants had been replaced by people like ourselves. The truncated battalions had become mere targets for frightfulness. The survivors did not march home to the place of their enlistment. They were demobbed piecemeal. It was the end of a tradition.

That we shall ever see again the thin red line, the four-deep square, is unthinkable. But what is worse is that we shall never see again that long winding column-o'-fours, the field officers riding, the band ahead, the wagons behind, the colours in the middle. Even in India, the aeroplane is making history. Even at sea, the big ship is making way for the small special craft.

What we shall see, if we live beyond the

first ten minutes of the next war, is a long procession of grotesque engines, by air, by land or water. Grey hulls half submerged, grey wings monstrously climbing the clouds, grey chassis reducing not merely roads, but a whole countryside to powder. These new modes of fighting carry no banners, support no bands, can have no history, for they are as vulnerable as they are expensive. Somewhere in the depths of them, lurk black-faced mechanics in dungarees, everywhere behind them must toil unceasingly a whole landscape of factories, railways and offices. The pen is mightier than the sword. It has conquered. It has defeated the regiment, and sunk the frigate. It may write off humanity as a bad debt.

XV

I-GREC, EMM, CÉ, A

As they turned away from the railway station at Ste. Blanque, Achille Delbaere and Benoit Watrelot had every reason for looking grim. They looked especially so amongst the crowd in the rue de la Gare. For the town was an important Railhead in the zone of the British Armies, and its inhabitants were either civilians or British Headquarters people or departmental employees, with well-brushed khaki, glossy boots and dashes of red or blue in their uniforms. Even the humblest orderly was obliged to shine his buttons and keep his hair cut. Achille and Benoit, belonging to the great suffering mass of French infantry, did neither. No poster bearing the effigy of a grinning volunteer had ever demanded of them, 'He 's happy, are you?' Nor did they sing, like the new draft of the Easthamptonshire Regiment, now pouring out of the goods yard :

> Where 's Bill Kaiser, let him show his knob,
> And we 'll get on with the job, job, job !

Achille and Benoit did not sing. All

their lives, a conflict with Germany had hung at the back of their minds. It had come, apparently would never end, and in the meantime their chance of survival seemed small. These English appeared to be here to amuse themselves. Achille and Benoit were not. The War was in their country. They had been home on their meagre ' perm.' or leave, and, hideous irony, had left those homes full of billeted English, up there in the occasionally shelled village of Kieckenpuits hard by the Belgian border, in order to travel two hundred miles by military truck, to defend a countryside of little stone houses and vineyards that they had the greatest difficulty in recognising as their homeland. They felt as do men who are called away to put out a fire in the house of a distant relative, leaving their own home in the hands of supercilious lodgers. On the top of all this, the trains had been altered, and they had to wait until after midnight to get away and risk sour recriminations—punishment even—from the harassed despotic official of the depot through which they would pass.

So, round-shouldered and flat-soled, leaning against the weight of their *musettes*, they traversed the streets. Achille, full-coloured and square, showing the tincture of

Spanish-Neapolitan blood that had come down to him from some army of occupation of the Middle Ages, grumbled that it was the luck of a dog. Benoit, a tall Fleming, looked at the doubtful sky of the spring evening and thought of the yarn factory in the Lys Valley where he had been getting on so nicely. They were both strangers, Achille a countryman, Benoit a refugee, equally strange in Ste. Blanque, where neither of them had any business, nor a single friend. It was not their commune, or market—in fact it might as well have been overseas, so foreign was it. Its pavements were hard as fate, its people not their people, indeed more English was spoken than French, let alone Flemish.

Achille remarked: 'We'd better have something to take.'

Benoit did not reply. They had left such money as they possessed with their needy wives, and as they surveyed the neighbouring estaminets, they found another difficulty. All such places were full to the door—with British. All the windows bore written notices, 'Eggs, Fish, Chips, Tea.' The trade in beer and white wine was roaring. The two friends did manage to squeeze into one place, but their modest request for 'two halves' met with instant rebuff:

'English beer only. One franc the bottle!'

A franc! Benoit shook a prudent negative. Achille spat. The girl offered:

'Champagne, then?'

Champagne! Achille grew annoyed.

'You are mocking my head!' he expostulated.

The girl did not even stay to listen. A corporal in khaki, with A.S.C. on his shoulder, had tweaked her elbow:

'Hi, Mademoiselle Nobon, Vinky Blinky, all round!' The two Frenchmen, dumbfounded, saw bottles—not a bottle, but bottles—produced. The glasses of the whole card-playing table were filled. The corporal handed over a twenty-franc note and received a little change. Feeling the draught from the door, he turned and perceived that it could not be shut because Achille was wedged on the threshold.

'Come in, don't bother about wipin' your feet!' he called.

'They have no money!' put in the girl.

'Ne'r mind, they 're my gallant Allies. Have a drink, Monsieur Poylow!'

Glasses were filled and handed and paid for, ere the two poilus could understand. They were confused, but Achille, who

had once been to a wedding feast, recalled the necessary manners. Raising his glass, he bowed.

'Messieurs les Anglais!'

Every one drank, but the corporal, slightly promoted by wine, could not let the word pass unchallenged.

'No, you don't. I 'm English. Canning Town. So 's 'e and so 's 'e. (Pointing.) But 'im with the red 'air, 'e 's a Jock, an' 'im (this was a tall lean man who seemed to have most money about him) 'e 's a b——y Yank. 'E 's 'ere for instruction. 'E 's instructin' us in Slippery Sam. 'Taint gamblin'. It 's a 'obby. By Christ, he 's a ——!'

How far the vinous friendship might have gone will never be known, for just then there was a rapping on the counter by Madame, and an English military policeman could be seen standing nonchalantly, a gendarme vindictively, outside the window. The estaminet emptied noisily. Achille and Benoit heard the cathedral chimes mark eight. Achille was sardonic.

'After all, with so much money as they, one must stop drinking some time or other!'

Benoit nodded.

They must tramp the streets until the

Commissaire would let them into the station. They resigned themselves. As in all French towns, they came suddenly to a place where the houses ceased and the fields began. On one of the first of these was erected a hut of extra size. Above its door hung a red triangle and the letters Y.M.C.A. From it came light, warmth, odour, noise. Achille stopped.

'I-grec, Emm, Cé, A! What does that mean to say?'

'How should I know?'

'Let 's see!'

They advanced, Achille adding:

'I always thought they must have their women somewhere!'

Inside the hut, though, were nothing but men, Tommies, tables, chairs. From behind a curtain came singing. A man with a badge addressed them in a language they did not understand. Achille explained in French that they were permissionnaires, waiting for a train. A sort of consultation was held over them. The song continued, rising and falling.

'One does that to give courage,' Achille remarked.

'Not me!' Benoit replied.

Now a man in uniform, with an air of something more than a soldier (but Achille

and Benoit had long given up the mystery of British badges of rank), brought them two mugs of a dark-brown fluid that steamed.

Achille asked 'How much?' but the man made a gesture of refusal, saying something about Allies. Benoit sipped the beverage, and reassured his friend.

'It is a kind of chocolate. They call it cacao.'

'It's good. It's warm!' replied Achille, who had never tasted anything resembling it.

As with all of their kind, of whatever nationality, the succeeding moments were occupied by the one thing that remained sure in all those years—absorption of bodily sustenance. When the hot, sweet liquid had mixed with the white wine, Achille, perspiring gently, began to recover his healthy, salacious humour. He nodded towards the invisible music.

'It seems to me that they must have some women in there!' Benoit was neither amused nor curious. Just then there was a commotion. The singing rose to a crescendo amid the scraping of chairs shoved back upon a boarded floor. Then it ceased. The curtain was brushed aside. Tommies came tumbling out. The man

in uniform explained that it was time to go. Intrigued, but docile, Achille nudged Benoit and they passed out and turned towards the town.

'Would that dog of a Commissary let us enter the station?'

'I don't think!' Benoit was embittered by the past years.

'Very well, my old 'un. I 'm going bye-bye. Tell the waiter to bring my coffee up to my room.'

So saying, they disposed themselves on the broadest doorstep they could find. Benoit went to sleep. Achille sat puzzling his curiosity over a notice painted on a wooden board, nailed to the door of a house opposite. He spelled the letters.

C.C.S. NURSING SISTERS' BILLET.

STRICTLY PRIVATE.

He could make nothing of it. His attention was distracted by a familiar sound, the rhythmic vibration of a heavy bombing plane, at first distant, then louder. There was some commotion, stationward, audible enough in the stillness of the shuttered town. He accorded it the cursory attention that men of his rank could afford to so remote a danger. He was more interested when the first explosion, preceded by a

sharp whirr, and followed by a clatter of broken glass and tiles, and shouted orders, caused a second-floor window in the house opposite to open. He heard voices, female voices, but having no equivalent for the word 'lady,' he listened, attracted but respectful, to exclamation and conjecture in sibilant English. Three more explosions followed, then the sound of the 'plane receded. Daunted but hopeful, he rose, trying to distinguish and be seen by, whomever there might be, up in the lightless room. He must reassure the persons, and one never knew what it might lead to.

He was interrupted by the cathedral chime, that recalled him to sterner matters. He shook Benoit.

'Sacred name, we shall muck up our train. Swarm along, you kind of number!'

Benoit was killed at Montdidier.

Years after, Achille came back to Kieckenpuits, as near as he could tell. Nothing was left of it, but the government restored his wife and family, who had been sent as refugees to Bordeaux, found him an English hut to live in, and a job in the Reparations Commission. On Sunday afternoons, after having shot with bow and arrows at a wooden bird on a pole, or played a game between bowls and skittles,

he sits in the corrugated iron estaminet, and if the name of England chance to fall amongst the gossip, he sets down his glass and speaks with authority :

'The English, they were not bad sorts. But curious. They had droll organisations. There was a barracks they put up with a red triangle over the door. It was not what you might think. It was a society. They called it I-grec, Emm, Cé, A. I never knew what they did there, but it was either to *rigoler*, or . . . perhaps to do with their religion.

'Ah, all that is Ten Years Ago !'

XVI

WHY EVER?

Geoffrey Skene the architect met Dormer from the bank, in the alley that led to the side door of the George Hotel, in the market-place of Easthampton. This was not by appointment. On the contrary. They had both made excuses to slip out from the offices in which they were employed, in order to get away from every one. Why had they not gone far into the country, taken their day off? Because that would have been worse still, would have involved elaborate explanations. Now to give reasons would have meant expressing their feelings, and both being extremely English, this prospect filled them with horror. These feelings were connected with the day, which was the eleventh of November, and the fact that, at eleven o'clock, they would be faced with that Two Minutes' Silence.

They did not dispute the appropriateness and utility of that observance. It was not that they were insensible, cranky, or conscientiously opposed to it: on the contrary, they felt it to be too little, rather than too much. It was not that they failed to grasp

its significance. They had both every cause to know what it meant. And both dimly hoped that people might eventually learn something from it. Their trouble was that they simply could not bear it.

Avoiding, therefore, the contact with the associates and conditions of their daily lives, both found themselves in the street, in the middle of the morning of an ordinary working day. And then, for the life of them they could not keep away from the market-place. Now both, without dreaming of consulting each other on such a point, had simultaneously an identical bright idea. The commercial room at the George would be vacant at that hour. It commanded the market-place, yet provided cover from view. Thus they met on the doorstep.

They avoided each other's eyes, gave a nod to the young woman who was making ready her bar against opening time, and ascended the linoleum'd stairway, amid the reek of floor polish, last night's tobacco and the fumes of three hundred years of alcohol. The commercial room was on the first floor of the Georgian building that faced, across the market cobbles, the great old church of St. Winnold and the Moot Hall. The three big windows gave

a clean sweep of the open space, and prepared as they were, the two friends uttered an exclamation of surprise. Never would they get accustomed to the changes in the very nature of their fellow-citizens that had taken place, changes that they themselves had helped to bring about. The market-place was packed, save for a small railed space around the War Memorial that stood exactly half-way between church and hall, where on a dais the Mayor, Bishop, some officers and dignitaries were gathered with two buglers. Skene ran his surveyor's eye over the spectacle.

'There must be ten thousand people there!'

Dormer nodded. It was un-English, post-War, queer. Never had there been such a crowd there in pre-War days. It was like the Doré illustrations to the old family Bible, like those frantic ebullitions of popular feeling you read about in books. It was orderly, spontaneous, undrilled. Save for the tiny dais, a line of British Legion, half a dozen policemen, the whole gathering was undrilled, unrehearsed, but deliberate and reverent, almost religious. Dormer felt the sturdy enjoyable pessimism that was his real faith abundantly reinforced. The city would never be what it had been.

As if to confirm him, the big bell of St. Winnold's struck the first stroke of eleven. If the tall square steeple had fallen on the crowd, they could not have become silent more unanimously. Then there was a soft—hish— As with one gesture, the men took off their hats, the women inclined their heads.

There was nothing new about the procedure. The heart-searching notes of the Last Post went soaring up into the low grey sky, piercing surely those November vapours, and dropped back mournfully as though there were in them something grosser than melody, that must fall and lie upon the great, engraved with all those names, granite block above which the Non-conformist now prayed and the Bishop gave the benediction. The aching stillness came to an end, and a great wave of sound rolled over the remembrance of another year. The two friends fidgeted. It was all very well for the major part of the crowd below, composed of women, or those who had been children ten years before, and from whom some relative had gone, never to return. To such it was a fit and touching ceremony. To Skene and Dormer it was different. There, across their lives, like a great scar across the face,

was the War—something you could neither obliterate, explain, nor turn to any useful end. Every year came this funeral of part of themselves, unavoidable, saddening in its associations. They turned away from the window. Their island birth and upbringing forbade the expression of any feeling, but Skene, the more vocative by profession, silently handed Dormer his pouch. While they filled and readjusted their faces and feelings they became conscious of an interruption, something no more than the buzzing of a fly that had been faintly audible during the two minutes. Now they saw what it was—a little old gentleman who had come in, and was seated writing near the door. At least, was he a gentleman?—he had a foreign look, and about his braided tailcoat, white made-up cravat, elastic-sided boots there clung the attempt to maintain some standard of appearances that certainly was not English. But old he undoubtedly was, you could see that by the way he peered at his writing, the stiffness of movement, and even more by his breathing that had been so plainly audible during the Two Minutes' Silence. As they passed on their way to the door, Dormer stopped suddenly and said with more feeling than he usually showed :

'Why, if it isn't old Holtzapfel. How are you?'

The face that Skene saw raised in response to this greeting was a face aged by more than years, a face that had been rubicund, full, a little complacent perhaps, rather expanded with good living, but fallen permanently, although the owner was now trying to put his best, most optimistic and youthful expression on it. The eyes took a moment to focus themselves through the thick spectacles on Dormer.

'Ach! How are you—Misder Dormer—It is years——'

He stopped. Dormer helped him on.

'Twenty years!'

'Yes—since your so-charming sister—she is here?'

'No. She 's in London.'

'A pidy. I would like to haf seen her.'

'I 'll tell her I 've seen you.'

'That will be kind.' But the little old man did not look as though kind regards were what he wanted.

'She 'll want to know about Emielie and Frederick?'

'You must say, Emielie we have no more, but I have her little Emielie, who lives with me!'

'Dear, dear, I 'm sorry. We all liked Emily, but we have not heard much of her since she married.'

'No. You see, her husband was killed!'

'Dreadful!' Dormer meant, of course, dreadful to speak of it. 'And Frederick?'

'He disappeared in Russia.'

'I 'm awfully sorry!'

'Yes!' The little old man looked as though he could have said a lot more, but he didn't, and from sheer awkwardness, Dormer went on:

'Are you over here for a holiday?'

'No. I would like to say, I am on the road again.'

'What?' Dormer was evidently going on, 'At your time of life,' but refrained.

'I have to make good something of our losses. I am in the hardware line!' The little old man laughed without conviction. 'This is an unfortunate day for me, in this town, no one will do any business.'

'They will, now the Silence is over.'

'Yes, but I must go to Pederborough and Lincohlen. I cannot stay.'

'That 's a pity. I would have liked to have had a talk with you.'

'You are very good.' But plain as possible on the wrinkled face, was the

thought, 'How can we talk!' What he said was: 'I will this order to my firm send, and catch my train. Good-bye, my dear Dormer.'

The two friends descended to the bar. Dormer had a half-tankard, Skene a mixed vermouth. At length he asked:

'Who 's your friend?'

'A German. You saw that!'

'Yes.'

'It 's rotten!' Dormer burst out. 'There 's no getting away from the thing. When we were kids his daughter came to live with us, and my sister went there, in exchange. They had a jolly decent business—ironmongery. The old man and the son, Frederick, came to see us once. They spoke English as well as you or I. Better probably. I never went to see them, but the yarns my sister brought home were all of a piece, and if there hadn't been that, there was the girl who stayed with us. Emily her name was. She might just as well have been English. But more conscientious perhaps, than ever we were, and believed in the Fatherland, as we used to believe in Heaven——'

'I wonder you didn't fall in love with her,' put in Skene.

To Dormer the idea never seemed to have occurred.

'I suppose she seemed so much like one of the family,' he replied lamely; 'so did the old man, and young Frederick, when they came to see us. They didn't understand games, an' all that, but they knew what work meant and they were jolly well educated.'

He ceased speaking. Skene said:

'Why ever did we get fightin' 'em?'

'These politicians,' growled Dormer.

'The politicians say they tried hard to prevent it.'

'Well, then, it was these soldiers. Heaps of soldiers in Germany, of course!'

'Not many in England, though?'

'You may say what you like, Skene'—when Dormer involved himself in an argument he always spoke as though the other side had involved him—'but if it had been left to us—I mean, if I could only have met old Holtzapfel and Frederick in 1914 we should never have got to fighting!'

'Well, why didn't you?'

'I don't know. I suppose we thought they never would really go to war!'

'That 's what they thought about us!'

'I suppose that 's so. We were so much alike. Much more alike than we

and the French. It was a sort of family quarrel!'

Dormer took a pull at his tankard and went on:

'You know how it is in a family. You have to keep the others in their place, more than if they are strangers!'

'Why don't you make it up with the old boy now?'

'I don't know. There's all these memories between us. We ought to forget it all, and start fresh. Why ever we don't I can't think!'

'Yes,' said Skene. 'Why ever?'

Outside, the Armistice Day crowd was going home, getting back to its job, with the look that only English people can wear, of having illicitly indulged in emotion. Quiet, almost speechless, under the shrouded November sky, the loosening pack of people poured through the narrow old-fashioned streets, here and there rebuilt where some London firm had established itself. Among them, hurrying to the station, sped the figure of Holtzapfel. It was necessary to look twice to see that he was not of them. Busy, practical, intent, with all the homely virtues and purged of his only vice—an overweening national pride that was old-fashioned rather than actually wicked, for

it seemed to date from the Imperial ideas of the 'nineties—it was not too easy to distinguish him from the natives of East-hampton. Just a touch here and there in his clothes or bearing, showed him to be the continental rather than an islander. Otherwise, as Dormer said, almost one of the family. Fight him ? Why ever ?

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